

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

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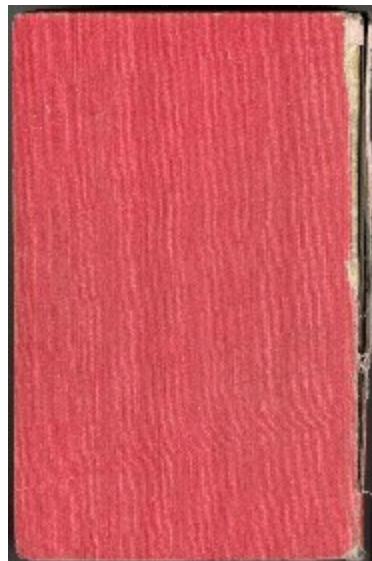
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THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

[TITLE PAGE]

Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45 The Relief of
Tobruk

The authors of the volumes in this series of histories prepared under the supervision of the [War History Branch](#) of the Department of Internal Affairs have been given full access to official documents. They and the Editor-in-Chief are responsible for the statements made and the views expressed by them.

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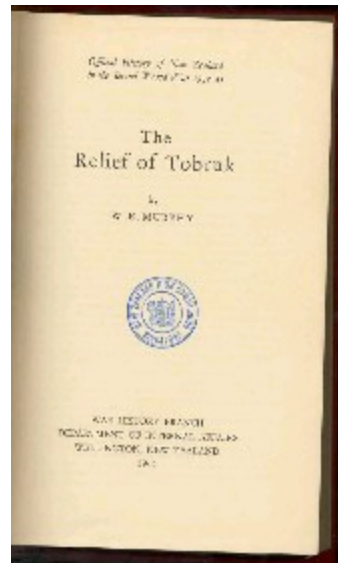


New Zealand infantry and Tobruk tanks. Men of 19 Battalion pass a Matilda of 4 Royal Tanks at Ed Duda after the link-up

NEW ZEALAND INFANTRY AND TOBRUK TANKS. MEN OF 19 BATTALION PASS A MATILDA OF 4 ROYAL TANKS AT ED DUDA AFTER THE LINK-UP

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

[TITLE PAGE]



Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45

The
Relief of Tobruk

W. E. MURPHY

WAR HISTORY BRANCH
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THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

PREFACE

Preface

A play with a cast of 250,000, a setting the size of *Italy*, and a plot like a pot of eels, twisting and turning in all directions, would be hard to stage. Yet this is what this book tries to present. Of necessity some characters appear briefly, often unannounced, and then slip away; others keep coming and going; a few have larger roles. Their importance is not to be measured by their time on the stage. Some heroes appear but once. Except for *Hitler* and *Goering* in the prologue, there are no villains—only men perhaps misguided or mistaken at some junctures. All do their best and most do it under conditions of danger and urgency, merely suggested in the play, which are fully understood only by those who knew the real thing.

The reader must find things hard to follow at times, as I did myself in the more than ten years, on and off, that I worked on this campaign; but the glossary and index have been made as useful as possible as guides to the maze and the people in it. Fuller explanations and introductions in the text of the work would have made it intolerably long.

Many readers will doubtless think it is too long already; but this campaign deserves close attention. It was in my view the greatest campaign of the New Zealand Division. I have examined it from all angles and at all levels and some of the deeds and some of the doers sparkle with interest.

I began my studies with a brief but rewarding collaboration with *Mr V. B. Gray* and have had much other help. The narratives and enemy appreciations from the Historical Section of the United Kingdom Cabinet Office have been invaluable and *Brigadier H. B. Latham* has sent me copies of original documents, answered questions, and wisely commented on proofs, drawing not only on his knowledge of the records but on his experience of the battle itself as artillery commander of the corps in which the New Zealand Division served. Sir James Butler, Mr G. M. A. Gwyer, and Major-General *I. S. O. Playfair* (with Captain F. C. Flynn, RN, Brigadier C. J. C. Molony, and Air Vice-Marshal S. E. Toomer) have carried out parallel researches from

which I have profited.

The German Military Documents Section of the Department of the Army, [Washington](#), has helped through four channels: by supplying source material for the [United Kingdom](#) appreciations mentioned; by lending me originals or copies of documents; and by allowing Mr [W. D. Dawson](#) of this Branch and the late Captain J. E. Betzler of the Union War Histories Section of South Africa to make translations which I could use. I sometimes found as a result that I had better German sources than British.

Mr [J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton](#), former Editor-in-Chief of the Union War Histories, and Mr L. C. F. Turner, his assistant editor, corresponded with me for years, provided many documents and drafts, and never failed to stimulate me agreeably. They also kindly made Betzler's translations available. Mr [Gavin Long](#) and Lieutenant-Colonel D. W. B. Maughan of the Australian Official War History have both been most helpful and Dr Bisheshwar Prasad and his [India](#) and [Pakistan](#) narratives and history likewise. This expert and willing support gave me a sense of belonging in some small way to a distinguished enterprise with branches in many British Commonwealth countries and in the [United States](#). None of the governments concerned has refused a request or denied use of a document.

The late [Sir Howard Kippenberger](#), as Editor-in-Chief, gave me a free hand, warm encouragement, and every facility at his disposal and his successor, [Brigadier M. C. Fairbrother](#), has done the same. The Prime Minister's files were made readily available by Mr [A. D. McIntosh](#) and his staff of the Department of External Affairs. [Lord Freyberg](#) let me use all his records, including his personal diary, and Lord Norrie similarly lent me his many files and was in every way friendly and helpful.

Many officers overseas and almost all senior surviving New Zealand officers have contributed in some way and very many junior ones. Interviews of repatriated prisoners of war conducted in England in 1945 by Mr [W. G. McClymont](#) and written statements by them about the actions in which they were captured have been valuable. I have interviewed hundreds of men myself, moreover, and corresponded with hundreds of others, particularly survivors of units which suffered such heavy losses that their contemporary records were seriously impaired. Though I have not relied on post-war recollections to establish important facts, I am obliged to all these

helpers and impressed by the frankness and accuracy of their contributions.

Members of [War History Branch](#), past and present, have done all they could, willingly and efficiently, so that it was a pleasure to work with them — particularly [Judith Hornabrook](#) and [Robin Kay](#) with the archives, [Elsie Janes](#) with a mountain of typing, and [Bill Glue](#) (who also compiled the biographical footnotes) patiently and skilfully in the long and difficult processes of publication.

Professor [N. C. Phillips](#) read the final draft and saved the reader from several clumsy sentences and awkward mannerisms and many distracting footnotes. Lands and Survey Department has worked hard and well on the maps and the Government Printer has been prompt and efficient in the many stages of his work.

To all these and to many others unnamed I am deeply grateful.

WELLINGTON

December, 1960

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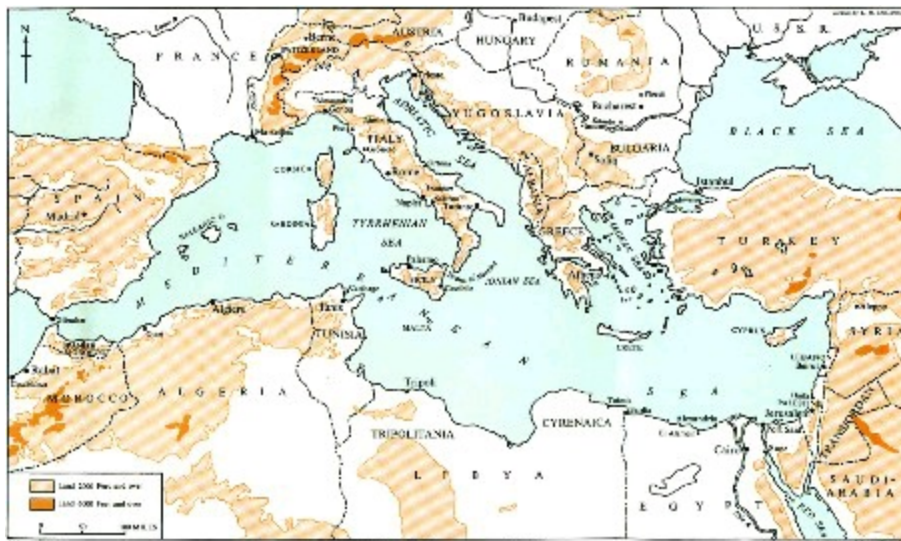
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THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 1 – AFTER GREECE AND CRETE

CHAPTER 1

After Greece and Crete

i

IN the history of the New Zealand Division the campaigns in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) are chapters of waste and frustration, an unhappy introduction to battle. An earlier New Zealand contingent had endured greater hardship and suffering in another [Balkan](#) adventure, the eight Anzac months at [Gallipoli](#) in 1915; but in 1941 there was a double dose of humiliation. The challenge to the [Wehrmacht](#) on the mainland of [Europe](#) failed miserably and then the Cretan outpost was lost. A third of the Division was left behind on battlefields and beaches from [Salonika](#) to [Sfakia](#), 900-odd dead or dying and the rest facing years of captivity. ¹ Time might tell that this costly experience would prove invaluable; but in June 1941 the loss was more evident than the gain.

Of the 16,700 men who had sailed to help ward off the German threat to [Greece](#), 5816 (on a July estimate) did not return, and it was but a small consolation that reinforcements at hand or on the way were more than enough to replace them. Many desert-trained veterans of the First Echelon were gone, and many, too, of the Second Echelon men who had served England in the dark days after [Dunkirk](#). Their places would be taken by men from the 4th, 5th, 6th and even 7th Reinforcements—in ascending scale of inexperience—who would outnumber the 'old hands' in many units. Yet morale proved remarkably buoyant, as the Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, noted when he reviewed 5000 survivors from [Greece](#) on 18 May and found them 'in great heart and excellent condition', and again when he met men from [Crete](#) at [Alexandria](#) a fortnight later, the fit and the wounded all 'convinced of superiority man for man over the Germans given equal weapons and equal air support.'²

It was in arms and equipment, above all in transport, that the Division was reduced to penury. All guns and vehicles had been lost, most small arms, even personal belongings in many base kits

¹ See McClymont, [To Greece](#), and Davin, [Crete](#), in this series.

² Rt. Hon. P. Fraser to acting Prime Minister, [Wellington](#), 19 May and 24 Jun 1941.

sent by an error of judgment of [Greece](#). Lorries in base camps at [Maadi](#) and [Helwan](#) were barely enough for administration, to say nothing of training, a situation which from the lower levels looked uncomfortably close to stalemate. [Middle East](#) quartermasters were unmoved by appeals on behalf of units not assigned an active role, and less fortunate units could see no way to reach this envied status without a modicum of training equipment.

Sixth Brigade, having missed the holocaust of [Crete](#) and returned to [Egypt](#) with its units largely intact, was among the blessed. By 27 May its battalions—the 24th, 25th, and 26th—were so far restored to battle-worthiness that they could assume a role in the defence of the Canal Zone against airborne or Fifth Column attack. The two other brigades—the 4th and 5th—could not hope for a high priority in replacement of war stores until reinforcements had been absorbed and the units brought up to something approaching their normal complements. Even then the flow of new equipment would depend on the future role of the Division, which remained for some months in doubt. By the end of June the field regiments had their full quota of gun-towing vehicles ('quads') and a third of their 25-pounder guns, but most other units were living from hand to mouth.

By 10 July [General Freyberg](#) ¹ was able to point out to the [New Zealand Government](#) that the units were 'almost up to strength', though the 6th and 7th Reinforcements had not yet arrived; but he expected 'wastage'—the bloodless technical term for what was chiefly the shedding of blood—to increase in the autumn and winter and therefore needed the 8th Reinforcements as scheduled. ²

The future of these reinforcements was much affected by a new War Office plan ³ for expanding the effort of the British Commonwealth which entailed increased manpower demands. Mr Fraser and the Adjutant-General, Colonel [Conway](#), ⁴ discussed this plan in [Maadi](#) with Lieutenant-General Sir Guy Williams, Military Adviser to the [New Zealand Government](#), and senior officers of 2 NZEF while [Freyberg](#) was still in [Crete](#). One part of the plan was to form an army tank brigade in New Zealand for oversea service, providing at least for the training months an

insurance of sorts against aggression nearer home. For this reason Fraser and

¹ Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Gk); born [Richmond, Surrey](#), 21 Mar 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914–16; comd 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–18; GOC 2 NZEF Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand Jun 1946–Aug 1952.

² See Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War (hereinafter Documents), Vol. II, pp. 33–5.

³ Organisation Plan 36 of the Field Force Committee (briefly FFC 36).

⁴ Brig A. E. Conway, CB, OBE, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Whakatane](#); born Reefton, 7 Apr 1891; Regular soldier; Canty Regt 1914–16 (Capt); twice wounded; Adjutant-General, 1940–46.

his Cabinet approved, as [Freyberg](#) did too (when he found time to study it), though he had an eye to the [Middle East](#) rather than the [Pacific](#). Meanwhile General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces, had welcomed a suggestion that the [Anzac Corps](#) which had existed for a short time in [Greece](#) be reconstituted on a permanent footing, a proposal which ran parallel to another part of the plan. [Freyberg](#) was offered command of this Corps when the crisis in [Crete](#) passed, but his response was lukewarm. 'I would personally prefer to stay with the New Zealand Division', he wrote on 11 May, though he would accept the command provided he could 'remain a servant of the [New Zealand Government](#) by continuing to be GOC 2nd NZEF and provided the New Zealand Division remains part of the Corps....' By the time he was able fully to consider this scheme and examine other parts of the War Office plan the [Maadi](#) consultations had ended, Fraser was on his way to England, Williams and Conway were flying to New Zealand, and discussion continued by cablegram. By 25 June [Freyberg](#) was almost enthusiastic about the proposed [Anzac Corps](#) and as late as 20 September he was still interested, not knowing that the Australian Government, plagued by manpower shortages, had decided against it. ¹ New Zealand was nevertheless committed in principle to provide a fair share of Corps troops, either for a new [Anzac Corps](#) or for any other Corps in

which the Division operated, and planning continued accordingly until outdated by the outbreak of war with [Japan](#).

ii

Other matters which Fraser tackled before he left Egypt included [Freyberg's](#) status as GOC 2 NZEF. [Freyberg](#) was to feel free, Fraser told him, to put his opinion direct to the Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces on any matter concerning 'the safety of the D[ivision]' (as [Freyberg](#) noted in his diary). The New Zealand War Cabinet, he continued, 'should have the benefit of your experience and in future ... will definitely ask for your advice.' [Freyberg](#) had the right to refer 'any matter affecting the safety of the NZEF' to the [New Zealand Government](#) and the latter would in turn refer any proposal for the employment of 2 NZEF to him for comment.

This clarified [Freyberg's](#) status, as a further safeguard of New Zealand interests. The Greek enterprise had in its very conception taken Australian and New Zealand help too much for granted—a situation to which the current naval negotiations between the United

¹ See Documents, Vol. II, pp. 1–15 and 22–69; Stevens, Problems of 2 NZEF, pp. 38–9; Long, [Greece, Crete and Syria](#), pp. 70n and 539–44.

Kingdom and the [United States](#) provided an unhappy parallel. ¹ The war effort of the two Dominions was concentrated in the [Middle East](#) to a far greater extent than that of the [United Kingdom](#) and disaster there was to them a relatively more tragic prospect. Twice in two months New Zealand came close to losing its one and only division, with its invaluable nucleus of trained officers and NCOs, and the Government had to take what steps it could to make sure that any such grave risks taken in future would be fully warranted. Fraser was not making [Freyberg](#) sole judge of this except in case of dire emergency; he simply wanted the facts relating to the employment of the Division to be adequately disclosed to the Government.

The Prime Minister was sharply dissatisfied, now he knew the facts, with the Government's briefing prior to the Greek campaign, and interviews with men back from [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) had impressed him deeply, in particular, with the need for

strong air support if the Division's contributions to the war effort were to be effective. But [Freyberg's](#) charter already gave him unusual powers for a divisional commander ²—an arrangement which, even with tact and restraint on all sides, could be embarrassing. Short of stationing a minister in [Cairo](#)—a step which even the United Kingdom War Cabinet did not take until the end of June—there was no way the [New Zealand Government](#) could gain the influence it sought without adding to the already considerable burden on [Freyberg's](#) discretion.

iii

There had also been criticisms of operations in [Greece](#), some of them aimed at [Freyberg](#) himself. Mr Fraser put some points as questions to an inter-services committee being set up to inquire into other aspects of the campaign and got reassuring answers. The committee in due course found that 'unavoidable circumstances' were to blame and gave [Freyberg](#) 'an unsolicited testimonial'. ³ A parliamentary colleague, Brigadier [Hargest](#), ⁴ commander of 5 Brigade in an arduous rearguard in [Crete](#), returned to Egypt physically exhausted and unburdened himself to Fraser with particular reference to [Freyberg's](#) method of command. Hargest was in no condition just then to make a balanced judgment; but

¹ See p. 24.

² See Stevens, pp. 93–6, McClymont, pp. 19–20, Scoullar, *Battle for Egypt*, pp. 3–4, and Agar-Hamilton and Tumor, *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941*, pp. 81–4.

³ McClymont, pp. 489–90, and Wood, *The New Zealand People at War: Political and External Affairs*, pp. 188–9.

⁴ [Brig J. Hargest](#), CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Gk); born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; Member of Parliament, 1931–44; Otago Mtd Rifles, 1914–20 (CO 2 Bn, Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped, [Italy](#), Mar 1943; killed in action, [France](#), 12 Aug 1944.

he soon got over it and (on 30 October) wrote to Fraser, when he heard the

latter was back in [Wellington](#), in warm terms, expressing abounding confidence in [Freyberg](#):

I have often worried over the anxiety I caused you when I unloaded my cares on you in [Cairo](#). I have no doubt now of the justification for doing so, but the effect itself justified it all. The General met us in several conferences and we cleaned up a great deal of important details. I was forthright in my remarks and he was splendid about it all — but the result has been good beyond my strongest hopes. Now we meet in conference and the whole details are placed before us — we on the other hand are free to express ourselves — and we must accept a share of the responsibilities. Thanks to you we have developed a new method - conference before the details are fixed.... I have never been so happy soldiering as now and never had more confidence — I cannot say more.

None of the other brigadiers who served in [Greece](#) — Miles Puttick and Barrowclough — joined Hargest in his complaints. Moreover [Freyberg](#) had had little opportunity until after [Crete](#) for the kind of consultation mentioned. The improvement in relations Hargest thought he discerned, therefore, was possibly due to closer acquaintance with a distinguished soldier who was not personally well-known in New Zealand military circles when he was appointed GOC.

Meanwhile Fraser had obtained opinions on [Freyberg](#)'s ability at the highest level in [Cairo](#) and when he reached [London](#). 'While Mr. Fraser likes [Freyberg](#) and is keeping an open mind', General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, wrote on 20 August to Wavell and his successor as C-in-C MEF, General Auchinleck, 'this is causing him grave anxiety.' None knew [Freyberg](#)'s qualities better than Wavell, who replied on 21 August that [Freyberg](#) had 'produced one of best trained and disciplined and fittest divisions I have ever seen and he must be given fullest credit for their exploits in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#).' [Auchinleck](#) also wrote reassuringly and considered that 'it would be great mistake to move [Freyberg](#) from the Command of the New Zealand Division....' ¹

iv

Mr Fraser's own position was in some ways like [Freyberg](#)'s. The civilian conduct of the war, like the military side, could not always be restricted to formal channels,

and Mr Churchill in particular was no respecter of hierarchies. In urgent and important affairs [London](#) sometimes deemed the effort and delay of Dominion consultation to be, like a Bank of England note, redeemable only on demand. As Fraser's grasp of these affairs grew his demands naturally increased. Both he and the acting Prime Minister, Mr Nash, showed

¹ See Kennedy, *The Business of War*, p. 160, and Connell, *Auchinleck*, pp. 274–6.

a proper respect for the opinions of the experts but felt in no way bound by them and did not hesitate to voice disagreement. Neither was happy about the way the situation in the [Indian Ocean](#) and [Pacific](#) was being handled and they said so. Their mandate was from the people of New Zealand alone and their Government would not abdicate its authority in favor of the Middle East Commanders-in-Chief, the London Chiefs of Staff, or the United Kingdom Government. ¹

On the delicate preliminaries to the campaign in [Greece](#) it was Smuts whose views Churchill sought, not Fraser's, though the South Africans could not serve there and the New Zealand contribution was essential. Personality was, as always, a coefficient of formal authority: Smuts was an established and impressive figure on the international plane, Fraser a newcomer. As the war moved towards its third year, however, Fraser and his government colleagues were moving on from a fairly general acquiescence in the strategic decisions of the [United Kingdom](#) and its professional advisers to a more critical and independent standpoint.

¹ See Wood, pp. 216–18.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 2 – LULL IN THE DESERT WAR

CHAPTER 2

Lull in the Desert War

i

EVEN the experts were baffled in mid-1941 by the strategic problems of the British Commonwealth in its lonely struggle with the Axis powers, perhaps soon to be joined by [Japan](#) with baleful repercussions. Planning to win the war was at this stage like planning to win a sweepstake. All that could be done was to buy more and more tickets and risk going bankrupt. Some tickets were on blockade, some on sabotage and rebellion in countries in enemy hands, some on a great bomber offensive, and some on the entry of the [United States](#) on the British side. None was on the entry of [Russia](#), which was not thought likely to bring any but temporary advantages. ¹

The security of the bases in the [United Kingdom](#) and [Singapore](#) by the accepted strategy was prior to that of the [Middle East](#), but it was mortgaged, as General Dill thought, by Mr Churchill to finance dubious Middle Eastern enterprises. In this connection, though Wavell's intimates recognised that he was 'always ready to take a chance', ² Churchill gained the opposite impression and it was a grave blow to Wavell to find that in one case—the [Iraq](#) revolt—his own judgment was wrong. ³ But time adds perspective to these clashes of opinion and personality. The British position in the [Middle East](#) was saved, as it happened, not by Churchill or Wavell, but by [Hitler](#). Overwhelming German intervention in the [Middle East](#) was possible and indeed warmly recommended by [Hitler](#)'s naval chief, Grand-Admiral Raeder, and by Reichsmarschall [Goering](#) himself. But [Hitler](#) instructed the [Wehrmacht](#) instead to conquer [Russia](#).

This was as Churchill suspected, but his hopes needed no such rich nourishment and he refused to wait. He had ventured to

¹ See Gwyer and Butler, [Grand Strategy](#), Vol. III (in preparation), and for an unofficial American view, Higgins, [Winston Churchill and the Second Front](#), Chs. 1–4.

² Cunningham, [A Sailor's Odyssey](#), p. 402.

³ In dealing with [Iraq](#), the advice of Gen Auchinleck, C-in-C [India](#), prevailed, with far-reaching consequences.

challenge the German colossus on the mainland of [Europe](#) with no allies but [Greece](#) and a Yugoslav faction. Scarcely had the last British troops left [Greece](#), however, when a new desert offensive was urged on Wavell, concurrently with an invasion of [Syria](#) and, if it lasted long enough, with the battle of [Crete](#). Forces and supplies were shipped round the Cape early in May and tanks and aircraft rushed through the [Mediterranean](#) at Churchill's instigation and at immense risk, with injunctions to Wavell to put them to good use at the earliest moment. The risks taken made even the appearance of delay smack of base ingratitude. 'All our hearts at home', Churchill says, were 'set on beating [Rommel](#) in the [Western Desert](#).' ¹ Great pressure ('undue' according to Dill) was exerted on Wavell and he agreed to attack 'before he was fully prepared'. ² Five extra days were grudgingly conceded by Whitehall for crews to get used to their new tanks and the offensive, code-named battleaxe

, opened on 15 June, eight days after the invasion of [Syria](#) began.

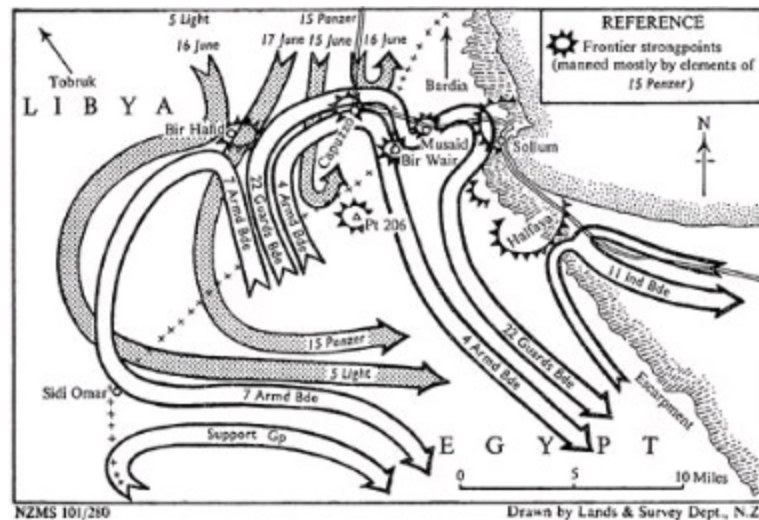
Despite heavy commitments elsewhere, Wavell had been anything but hesitant in his handling of the desert operations. An Axis assault on [Tobruk](#) had come to a painful halt early in May. Then, in a brief effort (brevity), he tried in the middle of the month to regain the frontier area and perhaps relieve [Tobruk](#). All that could be seized, however, was [Halfaya Pass](#) and even this vantage point was lost at the month's end to a German counter-thrust. battleaxe was intended not merely to recover this lost ground but, as Churchill wrote on 27 May, to 'inflict a crushing defeat upon the Germans in [Cyrenaica](#)'.

Such a victory over German forces was a consummation greatly to be desired; but its ingredients were essentially military, and of these Wavell was the better judge. He had hoped to mount battleaxe before the full weight of the newly-arrived [15 Panzer Division](#) could be brought to bear, but this hope faded early in June. He voiced misgivings, too, about British equipment in the light of current reassessments: the cruiser tanks were unreliable, the infantry tanks too slow, the armoured cars too lightly armed and armoured, and the enemy anti-tank guns

unexpectedly powerful. It was therefore a gamble to attack with fewer tanks and perhaps fewer infantry than the enemy; but Churchill refused to see battleaxe in this light and limit his hopes of success.

¹ [The Grand Alliance](#), p. 298.

² Dill to [Auchinleck](#), a personal letter of 26 Jun 1941, quoted in Butler, [Grand Strategy](#), Vol. II, pp. 530–2.



'BATTLEAXE' OPERATION, 15–17 JUNE 1941

'BATTLEAXE' OPERATION, 15-17 JUNE 1941

The desert operation fell far short, in the event, of Churchill's expectations and short even of the limited success for which Wavell hoped. The infantry tanks ('Matildas') of 4 Armoured Brigade destroyed or damaged 50 out of 80 of the tanks of 15 Panzer Division in one morning and overran many guns; but 7 Armoured Brigade (with cruiser tanks) was much weakened in an outflanking move and failed to hold a strong counter-thrust. On the third day Wavell intervened in person and allowed the commander of the Western Desert Force, Lieutenant-General Beresford-Peirse, to call off the operation. The force withdrew to Sidi Barrani in ignorance of the damage inflicted on the enemy, which was not nearly so heavily outweighed by the British losses as was thought at the time. Freyberg wrote on 9 October: 'We suffered decided reverse and lost large number of tanks. After battle several comds were sent to other jobs.' But dismissals and courts-martial ensued on the German

side and [Rommel](#) was anything but pleased with several of his senior officers.

To Churchill, however, it was a 'most bitter blow' and he received it alone at Chartwell, where he 'wandered about the valley disconsolately for hours'. ¹ Wavell for his part summed up the situation quickly and accurately and reported next day to [London](#) that 'no offensive in the [Western Desert](#) would be possible for at least three months', thereby rubbing salt into the wound of

¹ [The Grand Alliance](#), p. 308.

Churchill's disappointment. A few days later Wavell agreed with his naval and air colleagues to accept the commitment of holding [Tobruk](#) at least until the autumn, though the garrison could not now hope for early relief.

Wavell was now tired out and in need of a rest. The bombardment by memoranda from [London](#) which Admiral Cunningham (also a target) has described as 'singularly unhelpful and irritating in times of stress', ¹ on top of the inescapable cares of Wavell's vast command, was a serious distraction. Air Chief Marshal Longmore had been abruptly dismissed early in May and Wavell suspected that Churchill had for some time been itching to get rid of him too. The failure of battleaxe settled the issue and the decision about the future of [Tobruk](#) was Wavell's last important act as the Middle East Commander-in-Chief.

At the end of June he changed places with General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief India, and in a moving message of farewell on 4 July he expressed his thanks to the troops who had served him 'so well and loyally'. New Zealanders not long back from [Crete](#) read of the failures and setbacks when 'you have been outmatched in numbers and equipment, never in fighting qualities or endurance'. For those serving in rear areas there was a special word of praise for work 'essential to success in battle'. To this [General Freyberg](#) replied 'on behalf of all ranks of the NZEF' expressing the 'genuine sense of personal loss' felt by the New Zealanders, which Wavell gracefully acknowledged on 7 July.

That Churchill, most articulate of men, should prefer the fluent [Auchinleck](#) to the taciturn Wavell is not surprising. Yet the choice was in one way a curious one; for [Auchinleck](#) had already incurred Churchill's displeasure by seeming to 'play too much for safety and certainty' in the Norwegian campaign,² a fact of which Churchill was soon to be reminded. General Dill was alarmed not so much by the change as by its implications and hastened to put his views to [Auchinleck](#) in a letter of 26 June. In this remarkable document Dill absolved Wavell from blame for attacking in [Syria](#) with inadequate resources and for mounting
battleaxe

with undue haste—'except in so far as he did not resist the pressure from Whitehall with sufficient vigour'. On the other hand he allowed that 'pressure from those who alone see the picture as a whole and carry the main responsibility may be necessary' and that political

¹ *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 402.

² *The Grand Alliance*, p. 309; but in *The Gathering Storm*, p. 470, Churchill admits interfering too much in that campaign.

advantages sometimes outweighed military drawbacks in particular projects. [Auchinleck](#) would not have all the resources needed for his 'great task'; these would come later. 'But in the meantime we have a grim fight to fight and we cannot afford hazardous adventures', Dill wrote. 'So do not be afraid to state boldly the facts as you see them.'¹ In the terms of Wavell's dismissal, written on 21 June, Churchill wanted 'a new eye and a new hand' in the 'most seriously threatened' Middle Eastern theatre;² but Dill was evidently anxious that these should not be guided by Churchill alone. Next morning the nature of the threat to the [Middle East](#) changed dramatically when
barbarossa

(the invasion of [Russia](#)) opened, providing welcome though possibly short-lived easing of German pressure elsewhere.

Wavell's summing up after battleaxe was promptly forgotten. Auchinleck

reached [Cairo](#) on 30 June and the very next day Churchill urged him to 'renew the offensive in the [Western Desert](#)', if possible before the fighting in [Syria](#) ended. For at least six weeks, and possibly three months, almost the full weight of [Germany](#) would be turned against [Russia](#). What broad happy vistas this opened up: [Cyrenaica](#), then [Tripolitania](#), then [Sicily](#) or French North Africa! But the cupboard was bare. battleaxe had expended the prime requisites for a major offensive, and the new commander-in-chief, with Dill's backing, was not slow to point this out.

[Auchinleck](#) replied on 4 July in terms which contrasted sharply with Churchill's urgency. British influence in [Syria](#) would have to be secured and in [Iraq](#) 're-established', then came the defence of [Cyprus](#)—in fact all that was needed to provide a firm base. Only then could a desert offensive be 'contemplated', though he estimated that it would call for two, and perhaps three, armoured divisions. This did not sound at all like the kind of 'new eye' and 'new hand' that Churchill had intended and he set out his argument in some detail on 6 July for an offensive not later than mid-September and preferably much earlier. Prospects would be favourable by the end of the month, would not improve during August, and might diminish drastically in September—or sooner if Russian resistance collapsed. Churchill was anxious also about the 'offensive value' of the [Tobruk](#) garrison—a pet theme of his ³—in two months' time. But [Tobruk](#) was no Gerona and the Australians found it extremely hard to make any deep impression in the enemy lines from May onwards.

On 15 July [Auchinleck](#) stated conditions for the success of a desert offensive which, if accepted, promised to delay the opening

¹ Butler, pp. 530–2, italics added. Also quoted by Connell, pp. 246–8, who points out that this letter was not received until 21 July.

² [The Grand Alliance](#), p. 310.

³ See Harris, [Bomber Offensive](#), pp. 153–4.

until the end of the year. Even Dill was somewhat taken aback by this and the London Chiefs of Staff tried various inducements. Could Auchinleck not start the

operation at the end of September, they asked on 19 July, if they sent him another 150 cruiser tanks at once and another 40,000 men? Otherwise they could not afford this diversion of scarce shipping. With these tanks, Auchinleck answered, he might mount a limited offensive to relieve Tobruk in mid-November—a fortnight earlier if trained crews were also provided. If he could also get 150 more American tanks and certain heavy transport he might undertake a major offensive to drive the enemy out of North Africa. As things stood, he pointed out, he would not have even one armoured division ready for action by the end of September.

To the Defence Committee this seemed agonisingly slow. Now was the time to strike, or within the next few weeks, while the Germans could least afford diversions from their vast effort in Russia and while they were hard put to it to maintain their troops in the desert. There was only one way out of the impasse: would Auchinleck and Air Marshal Tedder, Longmore's successor as AOC-in-C, come to London and talk it over? This question was put to them on 23 July and the two reached London on the 29th.

There and at Chequers the argument continued. There was indeed much to be said for an early offensive and Auchinleck heard it over and over again: the political and military need to help Russia, the unlikelihood of a land attack from the north (from Turkey or the Caucasus) before mid-September, the strain of supplying Tobruk and the value of a concurrent sortie by its garrison, Axis supply troubles in North Africa, and so on. But he remained unmoved and with impressive dignity and eloquence presented the case for a November opening for the coming offensive, now called crusader. He outlined the immense labours which must precede it in office and workshop, on the parade ground, and in the desert itself. Assessing strength by counting tanks, guns and heads was of little use. Training at all levels was all-important; to skimp it was to invite disaster, as battleaxe had shown.

It was Churchill who yielded in the end, though unconvinced, and Auchinleck and Tedder returned to Cairo with a promise from the Defence Committee that 22 Armoured Brigade (from 1 Armoured Division) would be sent to the Middle East as soon as possible. In view of this Auchinleck had agreed to start crusader on 1 November.

There remained, however, a marked difference between Auchinleck's and

Churchill's views of the offensive. Churchill expected it to open 'a continuing path' leading, as a matter of course, to [Tripolitania](#) and if possible to French North Africa or even [Sicily](#). But Auchinleck was still inclined to see it in terms of security rather than gain. It was a tight situation which faced him. [Malta](#) was cut off after tiger ¹ from supplies from the east and the [Tobruk](#) supply line was expensive in small ships and air cover. The Fleet bases at [Alexandria](#) and [Haifa](#), the [Suez Canal](#), and [Suez](#) itself (the chief point of entry for [Middle East](#) supplies) were subject to air attack and a concentration of bombing against any one of them—particularly [Suez](#)—was much to be feared. Then there was the danger that the Germans might come down through [Turkey](#) or the Caucasus.

Auchinleck's sentiments were shared by Admiral Cunningham and Air Marshal Tedder, to whom crusader's greatest attraction was the expectation that it would yield airfields in [Cyrenaica](#) and thereby greatly ease the strain on [Malta](#). The importance of this tiny and much-bombed island in affording security to the base in Egypt was out of all proportion to its size. Only attacks from [Malta](#) on Italian shipping would allow the British forces with their 13,000-mile supply lines to build up faster than the Axis forces in North Africa. To sustain these attacks demanded a great supply effort, with massive naval and air support. Air raids on [Malta](#) slackened during May and even more in June and July, because of barbarossa and as a kind of rebate from the loss of [Crete](#), to which some [Luftwaffe](#) units were transferred from [Sicily](#). But success against enemy shipping could best be achieved by surface striking forces based on [Malta](#) and these, after [Crete](#), could not be afforded. In June and July sinkings therefore decreased and more Axis supplies got through to [Libya](#). Not for a moment could the Middle East Commanders-in-Chief afford to lose grip of this critical situation.

iii

In the rarified atmosphere of high strategy the New Zealand Division, while recuperating from [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), was mentioned, in a manner unacceptable to [Freyberg](#), only as a possible relief for the garrison of [Tobruk](#). This fortress was, like [Malta](#), a symbol of gallant defiance maintained only by straining scarce shipping resources almost to breaking point. As a festering sore in the side of the German-Italian army in [Libya](#) it was well worth the effort; but Churchill demanded even

more. He had been upset that the
battleaxe

plan did not include as 'an indispensable preliminary and concomitant' a sortie
from [Tobruk](#),² perhaps not knowing of

¹ Code-name for a large convoy through the [Mediterranean](#) carrying
aircraft and nearly 300 tanks from the [United Kingdom](#) early in May 1941.

² [The Grand Alliance](#), p. 308.

the hard fight of one brigade of the garrison in support of
brevity

, nor of the continual exertions by the Australians to drive in the dangerous
enemy salient at Ras el-Medauar, nor yet of the trouble the commander (Major-
General Morshead) had had to prepare another brigade to link up with the Western
Desert Force in the second stage (which failed to eventuate) of
battleaxe

. The garrison was not nearly strong enough to break out on its own and a
premature move would have been dangerous if not disastrous, as is only too clear
from subsequent fighting. By the end of June only 1000 yards of the salient had been
regained on a front of a mile and a half and Morshead had to keep three brigades at
full stretch to man the 30-odd miles of perimeter, each being relieved by the fourth
from time to time to find what rest it could, though there was no haven beyond
reach of enemy guns and dive-bombers.

When brevity and then battleaxe failed, the relief of [Tobruk](#) became a dream of
the future. Most of the garrison had been committed to action on 8 March and
besieged since 10 April and 'a wave of pessimism swept over the defenders',¹
though with digging, wiring and mining and almost incessant patrolling they soon
regained their confidence. By night no-man's land was theirs; but they could not fail
to note the increasing activity of enemy guns and aircraft, while their own guns for
lack of ammunition had to control their tempers.² This and the heat, the brackish

water, and the unvaried diet caused cumulative strain and sickness, often of a kind not adequately reflected in medical reports. As the post-battleaxe lull continued into July and operations in [Syria](#) ended, Lieutenant-General Blamey, now Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces, proposed that the garrison should be relieved by sea, by the New Zealand Division or [1 South African Division](#).

[Middle East](#) was not so amply supplied with troops, however, that a whole division could be replaced without widespread repercussions. The relief of 18 Australian Brigade (needed by its parent division ³) by 1 Polish Carpathian Brigade was already arranged; but who was to take over from Morshead's division? The question was settled in Auchinleck's absence ⁴ by a [Cairo](#) conference of 2 August at which 70 Division, formerly 6 (British) Division, was chosen.

Undoubtedly connected with this decision was a sudden, brief flurry of activity among the New Zealand authorities at [Maadi](#) and [Helwan](#) on 4 August. A warning order was hurriedly issued for

¹ Wilmot, [Tobruk](#), p. 167.

² See *Bayonets Abroad* (2/13 Battalion, AIF), p. 108, and 'Silver John', *Target Tank* (2/3 Anti-Tank Regiment, AIF), pp. 108–16.

³ 7 Aust Div.

⁴ Though in accordance with his wishes.

[Divisional Headquarters](#) and 4 Brigade to move to [Syria](#) at short and rather mysterious notice. Advanced parties would report at [Cairo](#) railway station the same evening. 'Destination and action at destination will be issued later', the order cryptically added. By the afternoon it was cancelled and the fuss ended. The Poles duly relieved the Australian brigade and the Indian cavalry regiment in [Tobruk](#) in mid-August; 70 Division prepared to relieve Morshead's 9 Australian Division.

Opponents of the relief fought a determined rearguard action, but Blamey and three successive Australian governments insisted and all but a battalion and a half of

the Australians were brought out by the end of October. British sources point to Australian domestic politics as the villain of the piece and Churchill is particularly outspoken. Yet it is hard to see how a major role for the garrison could have been allotted troops who had been in action for eight months and besieged for seven of them. Even the last stage was vigorously opposed, though there was little to be said for embarking on crusader with a garrison of bits and pieces—British, Poles and disappointed Australians. ¹

iv

Crusader was to take place in a corner of the world's greatest desert, the desert which stretches from the Nile for 3000 lonely miles westwards to the Atlantic and for 1500 equally desolate miles southwards nearly to the Equator. In current Army terms there was first the Western Desert as far as the Egyptian frontier, then the Libyan Desert, with the great Sahara to the west and south of it, though in truth from Nubia to Mauretania was all one wasteland, hostile to life and miserly with its treasures. ² These could not sustain modern armies and everything was imported: the men, their machines and supplies, and the issues they contested—all, that is, but water, found at scattered points along the coast and at rare inland oases.

Among the few fertile parts are the Green Mountain (Jebel Akhdar) of Cyrenaica, bringing rain and vegetation in season to 200 miles of coast from Benghazi to Bomba. There were found—or so said the Romans—the garden of the Hesperides and the dark waters of Lethe. But this ancient granary with its golden memories is small indeed alongside the endless miles of semi-desert which stretch across the base of the Cyrenaican hump, merging into deep sand dunes which seal off the southern boundary 100 to 180 miles

¹ See Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Vol. III, pp. 22–5; Hasluck, *The Government and the People*, 1939–41, pp. 616–24; *The Grand Alliance*, pp. 367–71; and Connell, pp. 276–83.

² Oil from the Sahara was then a mere dream.

from the coast. This barren and almost impassable duneland, the Libyan Sand

Sea, is flanked on the north and north-east by the two large oases of Jarabub (in [Libya](#)) and [Siwa](#) (inside Egypt), 150 miles inland, and east of these lie the salt marshes of the [Qattara Depression](#), narrowing the desert eastwards until at [El Alamein](#) it is no more than 30 miles wide. The Western Desert is thus a funnel starting 60 miles from [Alexandria](#) and opening westwards into the steppes of [Cyrenaica](#), 300 miles long by 150 wide. In this tufted semi-desert with limestone outcrops, a few twisting wadis dry for all but a few days each year, and here and there an Arab tomb or other vague landmark, the desert armies were destined to meet.

Between El Alamein and [El Agheila](#) they would have to share a 600-mile open flank in this semi-desert with seldom a serious restraint of climate or terrain on the movement of mechanised forces—a tactician's paradise indeed, but only for those with strong nerves. 'Going' in the [Sollum- Tobruk](#) area, for example, varied from impassable escarpments (mostly parallel to the coast at a distance of a few miles) to firm, smooth surface well inland which allowed mile after mile of comfortable top-gear driving. The coast strips below and just above the escarpments were inclined to be treacherous, with soft sand and broken ground entailing much gear-changing and many defiles. Here, too, the winter rains carved their wadis up to 30 miles inland and were survived for days or weeks by patches of mud or swampy ground (and hints of greenery), compounding the deception of soft sand and calling manpower all too often to the aid of mechanical horse-power. Sandstorms could at other times halt all movement in a wilderness of discomfort, though the wind more often achieved no more than minor irritation from sand scudding along the surface, clogging food, hindering the maintenance of machinery (especially aircraft engines), and fraying tempers.

The main escarpment on the Egyptian side took shape south of [Sidi Barrani](#) and curled and rose for 50 miles towards the frontier until at Upper Sollum it became a 500-foot cliff overlooking the sea, mounted only by a tarmac road, [Sollum Pass](#), or by a lesser route, [Halfaya Pass](#), four or five miles to the south-east. West of [Bardia](#) this escarpment broke up into smaller ones which in turn merged into two south of [Tobruk](#). In the autumn of 1941 what these lost in height they gained in tactical stature as they approached that fortress. To the south terrain features were so modest and rare that the frontier mostly followed the 25th meridian. The Italians

had put up a 169-mile barbed-wire fence embedded in concrete on the

Libyan side of the frontier to restrict the wanderings of the [Senussi](#) bedouin, but by mid-1941 this had become dilapidated and of little significance.

▼

In the summer and autumn of 1941 the frontier divided the opposing forces except for the British garrisons of [Tobruk](#) and Jarabub and patrols of the [Long Range Desert Group](#) which ranged deep into [Libya](#), offset by a small but important enemy encroachment on Egyptian territory at [Halfaya](#). The desert armies clung in the main to the coast, served by the coast road and on the British side by the railway to Mersa Matruh. On the enemy side a 47-mile road by-passing [Tobruk](#) ([Strada del'Asse](#) or [Achsenstrasse](#)) was laboriously constructed by 6000 Italians and opened on 9 August, saving enemy vehicles a rough cross-country journey. Only reconnaissance, training manoeuvres, or major operations would tempt either side for long into the desert hinterland. Though the desert was one vast highway for motor transport it charged a high price in lorries, fuel and supplies, all of which were husbanded for operational demands.

Even near the coast the desert miles drank petrol copiously and posed many awkward problems for an army like the British in which everything on the 'Q side' stemmed from Railhead. By this European doctrine Railhead was a benevolent institution established as near to the scene of fighting as comfort and convenience allowed. From Railhead came the troops, tanks, guns and other vehicles of the fighting formations. From it also came the supply lorries, like dusty or muddy pearls strung together in road convoys bearing food, ammunition, fuel, engineering equipment, medical supplies, comforts—whatever was needed. Back along the network of roads came the 'empties', the wounded, and, if Fortune smiled, the prisoners.

Thus it was in theory; but the desert decreed otherwise. Railhead there was indeed, by a happy conjunction of foresight and luck; but it was 140 miles by road from [Matruh](#) to [Sollum](#), 190 rough miles to Jarabub, some 300 by a roundabout route to [Tobruk](#), and more than 600 to the far corners of [Cyrenaica](#). The conquest of this vast area by manoeuvre on the open flank would inevitably take the British forces far

beyond reach of the usual supply services—the two echelons of RASC transport which normally travelled between Railhead and the fighting units.

Each mile the railway advanced westwards from [Matruh](#) would save many dozens of supply lorries and the extension of it towards the frontier became a matter of urgency. A tricky eight miles up an escarpment south of [Matruh](#) and on to the plateau had been surveyed by [9 NZ Railway Survey Company](#) and formed (but not completed) by New Zealand technicians and Arab labour by February. ¹ Work did not start again until 1 June, but this time the task was tackled in great earnest and gained increasing momentum. After battleaxe indicated that none but an offensive on the largest scale offered hope of success, more and more labour was applied and by 15 September the line reached [Mohalfa](#) (formerly 'Charing Cross'), gaining 17 valuable miles. The New Zealand Railway Construction and Maintenance Group with two construction companies (the 10th and, after 22 September, the whole of the 13th) and splendid Indian labour pushed the line westwards at a rate which by 20 October reached the astonishing average of two miles per day—bewildering to desert navigators who were apt to find their calculations wildly astray on their return journeys. The aim was to set up a new railhead and have it working as far west as possible before crusader opened; but there were some who felt the New Zealanders had raised their sights too high. All criticism, however, was happily confounded when the new line reached [Misheifa](#), 93 miles from [Matruh](#), on 8 November and the new railhead with nine miles of sidings was opened for business on the 15th. The saving in lorries thereby has been estimated ² at 4000–5000 and the railway cut the task of maintaining the large forces earmarked for crusader, at least in the early stages, down to manageable proportions.

In one way, however, the railway robbed Peter to pay Paul, since the locomotives needed more water than the whole desert army would drink, and demanded a huge increase in the supply. In fifty-six days seven pumping stations and ten large reservoirs were built and 145 miles of water pipeline laid—a vast programme completed, like the railway, in the nick of time to meet the needs of crusader. By 13 November water was reaching the railhead in adequate volume, much of it piped 270 miles from [Alexandria](#). ³

These great construction works went hand in hand with other capital outlay on the forthcoming offensive: airfields in the Canal Zone for heavy bombers, forward

landing grounds for light bombers and fighters, and roading and similar works as far afield as [Syria](#). Thus the effort of building up and maintaining a force of little more than 100,000 in the forward area engaged many times that

¹ See [Cody](#), *New Zealand Engineers*, Ch. 2 (in preparation). Operating the railway was a military rather than a civilian task and 16 NZ Ry Op Coy had some exciting adventures. A section of the Div Ammunition Coy for seven weeks carried sleepers for the railway extension.

² By [Smith](#), 'Military Railway Construction in [Middle East](#), 1941–42', in *Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute of Railway Engineers*, 1947, p. 469. But [Joan Bright](#) (*History of the Northumberland Hussars Yeomanry 1924–1949*, p. 108) puts the figure at 2700 lorries saved.

³ New Zealand Engineers also contributed, 18 Army Troops Coy being engaged throughout and many detachments from New Zealand divisional units from September onwards.

number throughout the [Middle East](#), to the astonishment and dismay of [London](#) authorities who found it hard to grasp the administrative limitations imposed on operational planning in an undeveloped land.



THE BATTLE AREA

On the frontier July and August passed quietly, though in the coast sector three columns (fait, hope and char in current Signals jargon) took turns at playing a dangerous game of provoking an enemy who in his strong arc of defences covering [Halfaya](#) and [Sollum](#) 'held all the aces'.¹ Gunners would push forward a single 25-pounder to snipe by night and later, as the technique improved, by day, attracting as intended far more fire in return than they expended themselves. On the plateau above the escarpment light mobile forces watched and waited while the enemy toiled with pick and shovel, digging, concreting, wiring and laying mines to extend the defences in a series of battalion strongpoints 30 miles south-westwards from [Sollum](#) to [Sidi Omar](#), a strong arm to ward off British intervention long enough to allow the Axis troops, when the stage was set, to capture [Tobruk](#).

This was a project on which Rommel had set his heart, but the cold facts of administration were against it. He had no counterpart to the railway from [Alexandria](#) and no sizable port nearer the front than [Benghazi](#). Transport aircraft did what they could to make up deficiencies but the supply situation was always uncertain and (largely because of His Majesty's submarines) at times critical. So the [Tobruk](#) operation was several times postponed and the prospect of invading Egypt faded into the distant future.

General-of-Panzer-Troops Rommel was nominally under the command of the Italian General Bastico, Commander-in-Chief of the Italian Armed Forces in North Africa, but Bastico's few attempts to assert his authority proved singularly unsuccessful. It may have been some consolation, however, to know that even the Army High Command in [Berlin](#)² also failed. A large independent headquarters and liaison staff was sent to [Libya](#) under a General Staff officer, Major-General Gause, who had orders not to place himself under Rommel's command but to report direct to [Berlin](#). But Rommel's 'morbid ambition' (as Gause described it) and [Hitler's](#) continued support proved too much even for OKH. In mid-August Rommel absorbed Gause and his staff into a newly-formed headquarters, Panzer Group Africa, and Gause acted from then onwards as his Chief of Staff. This was virtually an army command, including as it did the German Africa Corps,³ 21 Italian Corps, and 55 Italian

¹ Goodheart, *The History of the 2/7 Australian Field Regiment*, p. 73.

² Oberkommando des Heeres, abbreviated OKH.

³ Deutsches Afrikakorps (DAK).

Savona Division (in the frontier area); but its only mobile troops were 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions. The 20th Italian Mobile Corps, not yet battle-worthy, remained directly under Bastico.

The non-mobile troops, including a German division (Division z.b.V. ¹ Afrika) in course of being formed from independent regiments and battalions, had plenty to do either on the [Tobruk](#) front or the frontier line, and in August and September several small actions were fought to tighten the ring around [Tobruk](#); but the panzer troops languished in the summer heat. Their whole background of doctrine and training had been directed towards mobile rather than static operations.

A limited operation of some sort was clearly called for and in mid-September it was provided: a raid, code-named *sommernachtstraum*, ² by the bulk of [21 Panzer Division](#) to overrun a supposed British dump some miles south of [Sollum](#) and strike heavy blows at two British groups thought to be defending it. As the time approached [Africa Corps](#) strongly suspected that the 'dump' was empty and doubted whether much damage to the British groups would result; but for [Rommel](#) the operation was essentially action as opposed to inaction and had irresistible appeal. In the pale light of the last-quarter moon early on 14 September, he went forward personally with one of two battle groups of the division which threaded their ways through the minefields while [3 Reconnaissance Unit](#) swung widely southwards and then northeastwards to simulate a third attacking force. Fighter aircraft brought forward for the occasion to [Gambut](#) airfield stood ready to help.

The British covering forces, however, were amply forewarned by the roar of engines and tank tracks in the still desert night. The leading battle group came on fast soon after dawn but the British withdrew even faster, though one South African armoured-car commander was able to report that he was 'lying a close second to a

German tank' in an exciting race. ³ By breakfast-time enemy tanks had reached Hamra, 20 miles south-east of the suspected dump, and the wild-goose chase reached [Sofafi](#), another 20 miles eastwards, in the course of the afternoon. There the enemy halted, the tanks refuelled in dangerously close order, and the [RAF](#) and [SAAF](#) bombers caught them in the act. There had been no parallel movement in the coast sector below, where the sniping gun, well forward in its minor war of attrition, 'broke all records by scoring 5 for 225 before the breakfast adjournment'—five rounds fired for 225 returned. ⁴ But after dark even this coastal force withdrew,

¹ Zur besonderen Verwendung—For Special Purposes.

² *Midsummer Night's Dream*, aptly enough.

³ Goodheart, loc. cit.

⁴ *Ibid.*

leaving a small rearguard at [Buq Buq](#) and sending another nervously south-westwards from [Sidi Barrani](#) to meet the enemy armour. Behind them the water point at [Buq Buq](#) was needlessly demolished.

The night of 14–15 September had on the British side an exciting uncertainty and various detachments prepared themselves as sacrificial offerings if the Germans continued the advance. As far back as Mersa Matruh 5 South African Brigade sent a battalion forward as a delaying force. But no sacrifice was demanded and on the 15th the German armour headed westwards, pausing only to shake its fist at armoured cars which followed insolently close.

The dream had ended. How happy the awakening was can only be surmised from the German documents and contemporary comment was understandably guarded. There was some consolation from the capture of a South African office truck with three prisoners and some interesting papers (as against 12 Germans and 16 Italians captured). But *sommernachtstraum* came at an unfortunate time from the viewpoint of German Intelligence. One of its main objects was to reassure

Rommel that no British offensive was impending and thereby free him from worry about what the British might do when he attacked Tobruk. All Rommel could learn from the captured papers was that the British covering forces were slender and planned to move back quickly if seriously threatened. A week or so later he might have learned of a scheduled strengthening of these forces to protect forward depots and landing grounds for crusader. But Rommel liked to ride his dreams bareback and was only too eager to accept whatever support sommernachtstraum offered for the view that British moves would not clash with his attack on Tobruk.

As a fillip to German morale, which was also intended, the Dream can have paid but a small dividend, the British mobile troops being adept and pugnacious with their guns and too slippery for effective reprisal, while the 'carpet bombing' which the Germans experienced for the first time at Sofafi was anything but reassuring. It did much damage to the panzers and very nearly killed Rommel himself. The tank strength of 5 Panzer Regiment dropped drastically from 110 to 43, a difference of 67 which was made up so slowly that it was not until November, on the eve of crusader, that the former total was reached. Some of the 67 may have been in workshops for routine overhaul but the majority were probably damaged in some way or other, though only two tanks were abandoned on the field.

In aircraft the situation was even worse. Though the enemy got slightly the better of the fighter clashes, the balance swung heavily against him after a raid on the crowded Gambut airfield. The Panzer Group war diary plaintively records on 15 September that

Fliegerfuehrer Afrika, the German Air Force commander, telephoned to say that no aircraft at all would be available until 1 p.m. next day; all fighters at Gambut had been put out of action and bombers had to have fighter support. As a crowning indignity a number of Stukas manned by Italians landed within the British lines and were captured intact.

When the fuss died down preparations for crusader went ahead quietly. The 4th Indian Division under Major-General Messervy assumed command of all troops in the forward area and its 11 Infantry Brigade took over the coast sector later in the month. The 7th Armoured Division also moved up inland, strengthening the covering forces and promising heavy punishment to any similar reconnaissance-in-force the

enemy cared to attempt. As a further insurance the New Zealand Division began to assemble 180 miles behind the front.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 3 – PREPARING FOR ACTION

CHAPTER 3

Preparing for Action

i

GENERAL Freyberg himself came up from [Baggush](#) (a coastal oasis 30 miles east of [Matruh](#) ¹) with a small party a day or two later and stayed a night at General Messervy's headquarters at [Sofafi](#). On this brief visit, the first of a series by New Zealand officers, he found time for a quick study of the frontier situation, a short survey of the ground, and on the way home a halt to see for himself the good work of the New Zealand Engineers on the railway west of [Matruh](#).

The New Zealand Division, less 5 Infantry Brigade, ² had reached [Baggush](#) in the middle of the month to act as long-stop to the Western Desert Force while a more active role was being shaped. The Division was tentatively but not yet irrevocably committed to crusader. Such a commitment came well within the prescription 'affecting the safety of the NZEF' and a final decision entailed consultation between the [New Zealand Government](#), the [Middle East Command](#), and in the end the United Kingdom Government.

[Freyberg](#)'s own views were clear. 'We had taken part in two forlorn hopes', he says. 'We had ... been routed, losing all our arms and equipment.... It was most important that we did not have another failure.... troops can have heavy casualties, so long as the heavy casualties are not linked with failure.' These are post-war comments, but contemporary documents confirm their accuracy as a reflection of his thoughts at the time. 'What we wanted most was a success', he adds, 'but it was most important that we were not employed upon another costly failure.'³ Behind him and equally anxious on this score was the Prime Minister.

ii

At a government-to-government level a new relationship was emerging. In the course of his prolonged visit to the [United Kingdom](#), Mr Fraser, like Mr Menzies before him, sat in the War

¹ Fortified as a 'box' by 4 NZ Bde a year earlier (see McClymont, pp. 53–4) and subsequent occupants.

² Still working to fortify a line near [El Alamein](#).

³ Comments on my preliminary narrative, 15 May 1950.

Cabinet, and though he said little he learned much. He had been much perturbed by a scheme (duly put into effect) to move American naval strength from the [Pacific](#) to the [Atlantic](#), thinking this would prove an incentive rather than (as curiously intended) a deterrent to further Japanese aggression. ¹ The disasters in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) had followed and deeply troubled him, prompting a searching questionnaire of 30 June to the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff. Why had the New Zealand troops had to fight in [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) without adequate support? Had the lessons of [Poland](#) and [France](#) not been learned? Had poor inter-service liaison and defects in the [Middle East](#) system of command led to the [Crete](#) débâcle? It was a protest rather than a question when Fraser asked, 'What steps are being taken to avoid a recurrence of a situation under which well-trained and courageous troops find themselves battered to pieces from the air without means of defence or retaliation?' Looking to the future he added, 'Is the vital importance of air and armoured reinforcement of the [Middle East](#) fully recognised and are the necessary steps being taken?' ²

The answers were only mildly reassuring. Though the questions were restricted chiefly to the two campaigns they were in effect a challenge to the direction of the whole British Commonwealth war effort, as Mr Churchill was not slow to recognise. While in London Fraser did not press, as Menzies had done, for permanent representation in the War Cabinet; but he was no less anxious for prompt, full and frank consultation on all matters of vital concern, and the crusader preliminaries were to provide a remarkable example of how far Churchill was now prepared to go to meet his criticisms.

These preliminaries also indicate, however, some initial uncertainty on [Freyberg's](#) part about his somewhat contradictory duality of status, especially with a new Commander-in-Chief in place of one with whom he had reached some sort of understanding. As divisional commander he was clearly subordinate to Auchinleck and any corps commander [Auchinleck](#) cared to interpose—a subordination deepened

¹ Mr Fraser had attended a meeting in [Sydney](#) of the Australian War Cabinet when this matter came to a head and found the Australians apprehensive on strategic grounds but even more perturbed at the lack of consultation on a matter of vital concern to the two Dominions. See Hasluck, p. 346. Butler (p. 502) says the Dominion governments concurred 'generally'; but they had been advised of the scheme too late to do otherwise.

This was early in May and the situation vis-à-vis [Japan](#) deteriorated in Fraser's continued absence. The acting Prime Minister, Mr Nash, cabled crossly to him on 16 July that 'the customary policy of saying or doing nothing which might be construed as provocative by the Japanese has resulted inevitably in the very situation we are at such pains to avoid.'

² See McClymont, pp. 491–513, for full text.

by a lifetime's experience of the military hierarchy. He was acutely aware, too, how the need for military security in planning great operations governed all disclosures, how an unguarded word could ambush the fighting men. How much should he reveal to his Government, and by what channels? Fraser had insisted on earlier and fuller briefing than had been supplied before [Greece](#); what should he tell, and when?

[Freyberg's](#) leanings were towards caution and by the time he gave Mr Fraser his first warning of crusader—on 13 September—the Division was already on its way to [Baggush](#). Fraser was somewhat taken aback to read that 'Division up to War strength', that it was trained and was moving 'in stages' to the [Western Desert](#), to be followed in a month's time by the reinforcements training at [Maadi](#).¹ Battle was evidently in the offing and he at once sought more details. 'I gather from your telegram that the Division should be employed early in operations', he replied on the

16th. 'In view of experience in GREECE and particularly in CRETE I should be grateful if you would telegraph me the following information, if necessary after consultation with Commander in Chief, Middle East.' There followed another penetrating questionnaire, with the explanation that the Government needed the information 'in order to satisfy themselves and (if it should be necessary to do) to assure the people ... that our troops have not been committed to battle without every possible precaution and preparation to meet every calculable emergency'—a worrying addendum to a security-minded general. Two days later Fraser asked further if the Division was 'to be associated in a corps with any other division or divisions and if so with which division or divisions and under whose command.'

These requests caused some commotion. An interim acknowledgment went to Fraser, Brigadier Stevens² came up from Maadi, and Freyberg drafted replies in consultation with him which Stevens took personally to Auchinleck, together with a letter of introduction with the following rather stiff postscript:

It is well to state that under the agreement between the British and N.Z. Governments the NZ Govt. reserve the right to consult me upon any question of policy. From time to time they have done so.

Under my charter I have the right to consult them upon any question of policy.

He evidently expected trouble; but Auchinleck had heard of Freyberg's 'charter' and his reaction was disarming. He at once

¹ For full texts of the main messages see Documents, Vol. II, pp. 70–8.

² Maj-Gen W. G. Stevens, CB, CBE, m.i.d.; England; born London, 11 Dec 1893; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1915–19 (Maj); AA & QMG, NZ Div, 1940; Officer in Charge of Administration, 2 NZEF, 1940–45; GOC 2 NZEF, 22 Nov 1945–6 Jul 1946.

sanctioned the reply to Fraser's first message and added helpful notes to the draft reply to the second. Then, as soon as he could, he wrote a friendly letter to Freyberg:

22 September 1941

My Dear [Freyberg](#),

Many thanks for your letter of the 17th and for sending Stevens to see me. I am grateful to you for letting me see the cables and thoroughly appreciate the way in which you drafted the replies. Your attitude is most helpful and you may rely on me to do all I can to help you give your Prime Minister as much information as I possibly can, consistent with the need for secrecy, so that he may be re-assured as to way in which the New Zealand Division will be employed and commanded in any higher formation in which it may be included....

Not the least of the Commander-in-Chief's burdens arose (and were to continue to arise) from pre-war neglect by British Commonwealth leaders to work out the implications of Dominion independence for a joint war effort. All was now makeshift at a personal level, with a premium on tact, and in this—at least in this first instance—neither Auchinleck nor [Freyberg](#) was lacking.

Thus Fraser received his answers (dated 19 September), and though they told him little about crusader they were enthusiastic about the battle-worthiness of the Division, about which Fraser was asked to make no statement 'just now other than that Division is in good heart' because of the 'vital need for secrecy'. The questions are set out below with the answers in italics:

- (1) In what operation is division to be engaged? We are carrying out intensive desert training for defensive or offensive operations.
- (2) What role is it to play in these operations? Role not yet disclosed and as you will realise depends on many circumstances.
- (3) Is it completely equipped in all respects up to war establishment? Division is probably best equipped in [Middle East](#) right up to War Establishment except for items which are not available here or are at present in process of being made up.
- (4) If not what are deficiencies? 28 light tanks for Divisional Cavalry proportion light anti-aircraft guns both of which will shortly be supplied. Anti-aircraft Regiment at present on defence of aerodromes but returning to Division for training in mobile desert operations. Shortage Anti-tank rifles 5th Brigade shortly to be made up.
- (5) Are you satisfied that the Division is ready for action? Yes Division is trained

and when deficiencies mentioned in para 4 made up Division will be fit for war in every way.

- (6) Is adequate AFV support available for contemplated operations? Importance AFVs is fully realised and our strength now much greater and adequate deal with estimated situation [Western Desert](#).
- (7) Is adequate air support available for contemplated operations and have appropriate arrangements been made for its use in conjunction with land forces? Importance of air support realised and no operations could be contemplated unless it is adequate. Situation of course entirely different from [Crete](#) as fighter aerodromes available at all stages. Since your visit here attitude to air co-operation between [RAF](#) and Army completely changed. [RAF](#) are doing their utmost and combined exercises are being carried out.

'I do not think there is any Division superior to ours in [Middle East](#)', [Freyberg](#) added. 'Am certain that as force we have been treated better than any other for equipment....' Despite the guarded answer to the first question it was evident that a great offensive was brewing, and the next cablegram (20 September) by implication confirmed this:

We will be part of Corps commanded by General Godwin-Austen specially selected after successful command in [East Africa](#) and [Abyssinia](#). We will be with Indian Division and possibly South African Division. I am authorised by C.-in-C. to let you know for your personal information that General Cunningham late C-in-C East African campaign will be in command of operations as a whole.

With these bare bones of a small part of the battle plan Mr Fraser contented himself for a fortnight. Then he sought more information, this time from a different source:

4 October 1941

Following is for Prime Minister [[United Kingdom](#)] from Prime Minister:

For various reasons it would help us very much here if you could for my own personal information give me an indication when action in [Western Desert](#) is likely to commence.

But Mr Churchill was not to be drawn. Thanking Fraser for his 'Winch No. 1' ¹, he

replied on 5 October that the

date of operation uncertain owing to Australian demand to release all their troops from restriction [i.e., [Tobruk](#)] which complicates our plans. Hope these difficulties will be overcome. Will cable you later.

Fraser did not mind waiting; but in the interim [Freyberg](#) unwittingly injected a fresh and powerful stimulus to the newborn Churchill-Fraser correspondence. In a cautious but generally encouraging survey of the whole [Middle East](#) situation addressed to the Defence Minister ² on 9 October he slipped in the current estimate that in aircraft the enemy would have 'decided superiority in numbers 3 to 2' in the forthcoming operation.

Fraser at once rushed to arms, his post- [Crete](#) misgivings on this score thoroughly aroused. In 'Pefra No. 2' of 13 October he asked Churchill for 'the best appreciation possible of the prospective air,

¹ When Fraser used Churchill's own code-name in his reply the name pefra was suggested for future messages, initiating the winch-pefra correspondence which continued until May 1945.

² [Hon. F. Jones](#); see Documents, Vol. II, pp. 73–5.

tank and A.F.V. strengths of the enemy and ourselves in the [Middle East](#)', with technical details and the estimated scale and time lag of enemy reinforcement from [Europe](#). Echoing the [Crete](#) questionnaire, he wanted an assurance that 'the question of air support, which we ... regard as a vital factor, has been fully considered and appreciated by those responsible and that a situation in which our men are called upon to fight without the necessary means of defence and offence particularly in aircraft, tanks and A.F.V.s, will not recur.'

Churchill's first answer on 15 October, a brief assurance based on [United Kingdom](#) estimates with a promise to 'cable you more fully early next week', gave no hint of trouble. But it coincided with a sharp clash between Tedder and the Chief of Air Staff, Tedder's estimate being more cautious and taking careful account that the

enemy was able if he chose to reinforce North Africa far more quickly than the [RAF](#). The figures needed for Fraser's benefit could not be sent without the endorsement of the AOC-in-C [Middle East](#) and Churchill was angered and perplexed. He sent the Vice-Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Freeman, to investigate in person and told Auchinleck in a private letter that Freeman, 'an officer of altogether larger calibre', was available to replace Tedder if Auchinleck thought fit. ¹ But Freeman and Tedder quickly re-examined and reshuffled the figures, giving the [RAF](#) a more favourable balance, Tedder retained his post, and Churchill was able on 24 October to confirm his message of the 15th with detailed though not very significant figures of aircraft, tanks, and guns. He specified that the details were 'of fateful secrecy' and added that the London War Cabinet had 'declined to be informed of the date of the offensive'. ² With [Freyberg's](#) cable of 9 October, which gave a review of battleaxe, then of Auchinleck's preparations, the enemy's situation, and the New Zealand Division's current programme and prospects, Fraser was now reasonably fully briefed; but his inquiry was to yield yet another dividend.

As soon as Auchinleck heard of Fraser's [London](#) inquiries he called for Colonel [Stewart](#), ³ former GSO I of the New Zealand Division,

¹ Gwyer and Butler, *op. cit.*; see also Richards and Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939–1945*, Vol. II, pp. 170–1, and Owen, *Tedder*, pp. 150–1.

² Fraser thanked him on the 25th and there, for the time being, the winch-pefra correspondence rested.

³ [Maj-Gen Sir Keith Stewart](#), KBE, CB, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); [Kerikeri](#); born [Timaru](#), 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; 1 [NZE](#) 1917–19; GSO I NZ Div 1940–41; Deputy Chief of General Staff Dec 1941–July 1943; comd 5 Bde Aug–Nov 1943, 4 Armd Bde Nov 1943–Mar 1944, 5 Bde Mar–Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944; comd 9 Bde (2 [NZE](#), [Japan](#)) Nov 1945–Jul 1946; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949–Mar 1952.

and gave him all necessary information about the coming offensive to convey orally to the Prime Minister in New Zealand. At the same time Auchinleck wrote personally to Fraser explaining Stewart's mission and the need for the strictest

In the five convalescent months June to October the Division recovered its strength and grew stronger than ever. It digested what was needed of four reinforcement drafts, ² absorbed new or newly-arrived units and sub-units, reorganised its existing units in the light of experience, and learned or evolved new tactical and administrative methods for both desert and amphibious warfare. Some of the best officers and NCOs were sent home (chiefly for the army tank brigade); but others also went who had been tried in battle and had failed, so that those who remained commanded respect.

The organisation behind the Division, too, became stronger as [2 NZEF](#) acquired more facilities and formed minor units of various kinds. Though the bulk of the Corps troops New Zealand was to provide under the FFC 36 plan were to be raised at home (and did not in the end leave there), [Freyberg](#) wanted if he could to form a regiment of medium guns from resources in Egypt. The Division was already largely self-contained, the army tank brigade was expected in due course, and with a New Zealand medium regiment as well he would command the powerful and balanced force of all arms which had long been his ambition. ³ But manpower proved insufficient and he agreed instead to raise another RMT company, a compromise less curious than it sounds. Troop-carrying lorries were more essential in mobile operations than medium guns, though they were more easily borrowed. Consequently the Division for the rest of the war had to take whatever medium guns the Corps or Army in which it served was able to grant it. This was in accordance with a well-established principle of the British Army which sharply conflicted with [Freyberg's](#) ambitions and the New Zealand practice. ⁴ In forces from the [United Kingdom](#), armoured

¹ The documentation of this episode unfortunately lacks a personal letter from [Freyberg](#) to Fraser of 29 Sep (mentioned in [Freyberg's](#) diary and acknowledged by Fraser on 6 Nov) which has not been traced.

² Later sections of the 4th and the 5th Reinforcements (May), the 6th

(July-August), and the 7th (October), with an average of 4000 each.

³ See Documents, Vol. I, pp. 50–2.

⁴ [Freyberg](#) had perhaps been too ready to lend New Zealand units when needed, as he pointed out in a letter to Mr Fraser of 18 Dec:

‘... in my efforts to get the Force together for training I am frequently at variance with Higher Military opinions.

‘General Blamey will not lend a single Australian unit. His policy has made him non persona grata. While we lent everything we were very popular. As soon as we asked for our units back they looked upon me as a Fifth Columnist.’

units, medium and anti-aircraft artillery, machine-gun battalions, and even RMT companies were switched from division to division as circumstances and economy required, a policy destructive of any esprit de corps above regimental level and in the case of New Zealand units difficult to administer, since it raised problems of discipline, for example, and pay which were better avoided.

When 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, to take one case, completed its training in August, the activities of German night bombers against [Alexandria](#) and the Canal area created much demand for anti-aircraft gunners. Since the 40-millimetre Bofors guns were also in short supply an active role for the regiment became imperative. Thus 41 and 43 Batteries soon saw action at Tel-el-Kebir, [Ismailia](#), [Kantara](#) and [Port Said](#) and 42 Battery manned guns at [Ikingi Maryut](#) and Aboukir near [Alexandria](#). Regimental Headquarters was compensated for the temporary loss of 42 Battery (under direct command of British Troops in Egypt) by gaining temporary command of a light and a heavy battery of Royal Artillery. Valuable experience resulted, several enemy aircraft were ‘shared’ with neighbouring gunners, and the unit soon gained such proficiency that BTE was understandably reluctant to part with it. When the time came for desert manoeuvres, however, [General Freyberg](#) wanted it back. The regiment needed training for a mobile role and he had to insist that it be released.

Similarly, when GHQ noted in a Divisional movement order that 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company was earmarked to go to [Baggush](#) it promptly

objected. [Freyberg](#) had responded favourably on 7 August to a GHQ request (to 2 AIF and 2 NZEF) that the 'fullest and most economical use' be made of Base and L of C troops by treating them as 'part of a general pool', though he felt that New Zealand troops of that nature should wherever possible be used at least partly to support the Division. The Deputy Chief of General Staff (Major-General N. M. Ritchie) sharply reminded him of this on 7 September. But the case of RMT companies was out of the ordinary. They were used on the L of C as general carriers; but they had, too, to carry infantry into battle. This called for strong nerves and careful training—for the infantry as well as the drivers. So [Freyberg](#) again insisted and on 11 September Ritchie agreed that the company should move with the Division and stay with it for about ten days' training, after which it would probably be needed to help prepare for the coming offensive. 'Every effort will be made', Ritchie added, 'to use this coy in work connected with the NZ Div or in the area occupied by NZ Div.' So far so good; but the interests of 2 NZEF and MEF conflicted and friction was bound to recur.

Current demands for the services of the New Zealand brigades and some specialist units in various capacities clashed, as usual, with the training and re-equipping of the Division for operations. All three brigades served in the Canal area at some stage and had a taste of night bombing there, luckily with no loss other than of sleep. ¹ Sixth Brigade continued in its anti-parachutist role until mid-August, then returned to [Helwan](#) for a four-day exercise, and finally prepared to move back to the Canal area, this time to [Kabrit](#). There on the shores of the [Great Bitter Lake](#) was the Combined Operations school, where 5 Brigade served a brief apprenticeship before relieving 6 Brigade at [Ismailia](#), while 4 Brigade took its turn at the school, practising embarkations and assault landings on the far shore of the lake. The skills thus acquired were never, as things turned out, to be used in action, and so it was perhaps just as well that events overtook intentions and 6 Brigade was diverted at the last moment from [Kabrit](#) to the [Western Desert](#) in mid-September. Units carried out whatever training their other duties allowed in the period June-September and despite interruptions made fair progress. At a higher level, however, much training was still required.

It was easy for the various commands in the [Middle East](#) to look on formations out of the line as reservoirs of labour for defence works and similar tasks. So much

needed doing and time spent on training produced so few tangible results. Hence a move at short notice by 5 Brigade on 5 September to dig last-ditch defences in front of the Nile Delta and build roads to serve them—two days after Divisional Headquarters had been warned to prepare to move to the Western Desert for operational reasons! Then 4 Brigade was despatched to Baggush in mid-September, with 6 Brigade (by a last-minute change of plan) hard on its heels. This last move, as the 6 Brigade diary suggests, may have been 'not unconnected with German recce moves in the Western Desert' (

sommernachtstraum

), though the Division was in any case taking over the 'command, care and maintenance' of the Baggush Box from 4 Indian Division and 161 Infantry Brigade. The posture, in other words, was defensive and in such a situation the force commander concerned could always think of a hundred tasks for the newcomers, all claiming priority over mere training. Thus it had been since May and still was with 1 South African Division at Matruh where, despite frequent appeals by their commander, the South Africans were allowed no time until 11 October for training

¹ To their miscellaneous duties 5 and 6 Bdes had to add stevedoring at Ismailia and elsewhere to replace local labour frightened off by these raids.

even at company level: five months with not a single battalion exercise! Little wonder, then, that as crusader

approached the senior South African officers became increasingly anxious.

A similar fate might have threatened the two New Zealand brigades: though much had already been done to the Baggush defences they were far from complete and some parts had fallen into disrepair. But Baggush was 30 miles farther from the front than Matruh and for the moment much less important. At all events no serious effort was made to turn the New Zealanders into navvies and any such attempt would have met stern opposition from Freyberg. Not only was he armed with his special powers, but he was under officers who had been very much junior to him in the British Army between the wars, a fact of which they could not fail to be aware,

sometimes uncomfortably so. Training, then, came first and the [Baggush](#) defences, though held more or less ready, had second call on the time and energies of the New Zealand units.

v

Bit by bit nearly all the Division assembled at [Baggush](#), some elements by road, others by rail, and one unit, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, by a three-day cross-country drive from [Mena](#) ¹—a valuable exercise. The NZASC companies were stationed at [Fuka](#) a few miles to the east, where they were conveniently placed to carry out their current duties as general carriers. ² The specialist arms had mostly stayed in base camp at [Maadi](#) or [Helwan](#) until this move, attaching only such elements to the infantry brigades in the Canal area or on training exercises as were essential for their purposes. All had to get used to new equipment and techniques: the Divisional Cavalry to light tanks, the field regiments to a new three-battery organisation, the anti-tank regiment to new portées (lorries adapted to carry or tow 2-pounders) and 75-millimetre guns, and the Engineers and Signals to a variety of new equipment. All received their share, too, of four-wheel-drive trucks and lorries from [Canada](#) or the [United States](#) which removed much of the drudgery from desert driving. Some units even received one or two strange-looking vehicles then called bantam cars but later famous as jeeps. As a long stride towards making the Division fully mobile (in the technical sense), HQ 2 NZEF formed 6 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company during

¹ A point of departure strikingly marked by the Great Pyramid and the enigmatic Sphinx.

² Items carried by 4 RMT Coy, for example, included ammunition, petrol, water and other supplies, Cypriot pioneer troops, and sheep for Indian units.

October. ¹ Early in the month 5 Brigade downed tools at [Alamein](#) and moved to [Baggush](#), where it was quickly absorbed into a busy routine of training and re-equipping. The transition from rags to riches was for all units fast and exciting.

Freyberg's instructions from Western Desert Force early in September were to practise moving brigades on wheels over the desert in 'open formation'—an expression not nearly as specific as it sounded. A brigade group contained nearly 1000 vehicles and was most vulnerable when on the move. In what order should it travel and rest by day and by night?: four problems to which no standard solution existed and which each brigade solved as best it could by trial and error. Wide dispersion by day would reduce damage from air raids, but at the price of long and vulnerable defensive perimeters and reduced manoeuvrability. Moving across country in darkness without headlamps or tail lights created another set of problems: how to reconnoitre and light the route and destination, how to traverse rough ground, how to find specific vehicles in the sprawling group, how to time moves and estimate distances the group could cover—how, in short, to take tactical advantage of the hours of darkness. The general aim was to be able to move quickly across open desert, to achieve surprise wherever possible, to overcome if need be strong all-round defences, and to consolidate against armoured counter-attack. This was, so far as could be guessed, 'the most difficult operation in which we were likely to take part', as Freyberg later wrote.² Against seasoned German troops it could not lightly be attempted and the understanding between all arms at all levels in attack and defence was immensely important. This could be improved only by practice and by early October all battalions had exercised with the anti-tank and Vickers guns which would normally be attached to them. Brigade exercises were an altogether larger undertaking, needing careful preparation. Tanks could not be borrowed, a serious deficiency; but all other troops were at hand or within call and staffs were soon immersed in planning brigade manoeuvres.

The various units, sub-units, and individuals meanwhile did all they could to fit themselves for the desert. Navigation—a strange term in army circles—was much studied by officers, NCOs and drivers, with magnetic or sun compasses for bearings and

¹ Yet another ASC company was needed to move the whole Division simultaneously and one was duly lent by the RASC.

Several non-divisional entities were also formed during the month: 'T' Air Support Control Signals Section, 'A' and 'B' Field Maintenance Centres, and 'X' Water Issue Section, all needed for the vast Corps organisation

within which the Division was to operate.

² 'The New Zealand Division in [Cyrenaica](#)', a report printed for limited circulation early in 1942, p. 2.

speedometers to measure distances. The infantry improved their marksmanship with small arms and mortars and used up their training quotas of live grenades. By day all units had a full curriculum and night marches and patrols were frequent. Engineer detachments showed how to lay, detect and lift anti-tank mines or blast gaps through barbed wire with Bangalore torpedoes, and a special squad of the [Green Howards](#) gave a series of astonishing demonstrations of wire-crushing. A new call-sign procedure entailed much hurried memorising of letter combinations in Divisional Signals and new wireless codes demanded countless hours of study throughout the Division. In between times men worked on the [Baggush](#) defences and periodically manned them for twenty-four hours at a time. Platoon, company and battalion battle drills were rehearsed with great care to extract all possible benefit in increased skills and confidence for the trials which lay ahead.

A series of operation orders and instructions, both written and oral, were issued on 8 October for the first full-scale brigade manoeuvre. [Divisional Headquarters](#) emerged from its maze of dugouts and tunnels next day, elaborately sorted its various parts into a reconnaissance party, a Main Group, a Closing Group, an Advance B Echelon and a Rear Group, and set out for a 30-mile drive eastwards along the coast road and then 20 miles south-eastwards across rocky desert, the last part in darkness and with no lights other than shaded hurricane lamps posted at intervals to mark the route. A short drive next day and a longer and somewhat hazardous night journey took the group, now including Divisional Artillery Headquarters with two field regiments and the bulk of 6 Infantry Brigade Group (nearly 500 vehicles, an impressive sight, though only half the full quota), to an assembly area some 40 miles westwards. From there 24 Battalion with [RAF](#) fighter support mounted an attack on 11 October on 'Sidi Clif', a wired and mined dummy strongpoint laid out previously by a section of 7 Field Company. Sappers cleared a lane through the minefields, a fictitious regiment of I tanks (represented by lorries) drove through and fanned out, covered by high-explosive and smoke concentrations from the field guns, and the infantry and supporting weapons quickly followed up

and settled in to meet a notional counter-attack. The 26th Battalion Group pushed through to 'Bir Stella' and consolidated likewise with its quota of supporting arms. The exercise was over by 1 p.m. and the large gallery of 'brasshats' was suitably impressed.

With minor variations, Sidi Clif and Bir Stella were duly captured again on the 16th by 4 Infantry Brigade Group (with Divisional Cavalry as well this time) and on the 20th by 5 Infantry Brigade Group, thereby completing 'Div Exercise No. 3'.

Manoeuvres

by all three brigades had gone largely according to plan and much had been learned about handling large aggregations of vehicles by day and by night. If little could be learned in their absence about co-operation with I tanks, one of the two main objects, the techniques of moving and deploying a large mobile force in the desert were much improved and standard tables were now drawn up giving speeds and distances for cross-country travel under various conditions as follows:

	Daylight		Moonlight		Darkness	
	Distance in Miles	Rate in Miles in the Hour	Distance	Rate	Distance	Rate
Including artillery	70	7	56	7	40	5
Without artillery	80	10	56	7	40	5
Move expected to end with a fight	60	10 ¹	42	7	30	5
With route lit by lamps	—	—	—	—	30	5
Unlit route	—	—	—	—	?	?

[Freyberg](#) was much impressed with the flexibility desert-worthy lorries gave to infantry operations. Units and their supporting weapons could be moved quickly, attacks from different directions could be synchronised 'with some degree of certainty',² and planning was in general simplified, particularly in view of the savings in artillery ammunition resulting from swifter approaches, assaults, and subsequent consolidation. The tactical setting of the 'attacks' embodied certain misconceptions of the current situation at the frontier and the role and capabilities of the I tanks remained uncertain, the tendency being to overrate them. With these reservations the exercises could be accounted successful and testified to the high standard of unit training. No brigade night attack was practised, but units had trained to this end.

Veterans of [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) could well understand [Freyberg's](#) insistence that vehicles should be 200 yards apart in daylight, whether halted or on the move, and, as added insurance against loss from air raids, that slit trenches should be dug for everyone at all lengthy halts. But a new type of warfare was envisaged when he laid down that a move into enemy territory would be 'on the hedgehog principle' so as to be able to 'meet attacks from all directions'. Flanks and rear had no stable connotation for manoeuvre across open desert, though any move which exposed a flank to the enemy was to be avoided if possible. The main defect of the brigade exercises as seen in retrospect was that they focussed attention on a hypothetical attack of a kind which the Division was not in fact called on to carry out in earnest, to the detriment of more general

¹ These figures were proved rather optimistic, this one especially so.

² Quotations are from [Freyberg's](#) lecture notes.

lessons. The pressing problem of what to do with the vast mass of non-fighting vehicles when in contact with the enemy, for example, remained unsolved, possibly because half these vehicles did not take part in the schemes.

To [Freyberg](#) and his brigadiers it was already clear that there would be hard fighting ahead. It was a prospect which, after [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), was at once welcome and dreaded. Losses there were bound to be, as in the earlier campaigns, but if the outcome was a failure, added to the frustrations and tragedies which already marred the Division's record, it could be disastrous for [2 NZEF](#) and indeed for New Zealand. With this in mind [Freyberg](#) scrutinised every detail of the plan which began to emerge.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 4 – THE CRUSADER PLAN

CHAPTER 4

The crusader Plan

i

BATTLEAXE had been viewed at GHQ MEF as a disaster and it was only by displaying this spectre, with dire warnings of possible repetition, to the service and political heads in London that Auchinleck was able to delay crusader until administrative facilities promised adequate support. It was plain enough that battleaxe had been uncomfortably constricted by the inability of the supply services to support an ambitious tactical plan and Auchinleck was determined not to let crusader suffer under the same handicap. The comparative freedom from administrative limitations, however, was like strong and unaccustomed wine to the planners and went to their heads. Much time was wasted on a quite impracticable scheme to by-pass not only the frontier defences but the Tobruk front as well and make the main thrust across the base of the Cyrenaican bulge to the Gulf of Sirte. It is curious that this was one of the two alternatives Auchinleck put to his new army commander, ¹ General Cunningham, on 2 September, the other being to attack 'from the coastal sector, south of the escarpment, and to feint from the centre and south'—the centre presumably being the Tobruk front. The ultimate aim was to drive the enemy out of North Africa, but crusader was concerned only with capturing Cyrenaica, to be achieved in the first instance by destroying the enemy's armoured forces.

Cunningham elected to try to trap the enemy armour between the frontier and a line some miles west of Tobruk. With half again as many tanks as the enemy (as he estimated in an appreciation of 28 September) he should have no great trouble in disposing of the German-Italian armour despite a similar disparity of air strength in favour of the enemy. Meanwhile the mass of mobile infantry would guard the L of C and watch the frontier strongpoints. If the shape of the tank battle allowed, the Tobruk garrison might break out to link up with the armoured force; but the relief of Tobruk 'must be incidental to the plan'.

¹ Headquarters Western Army was formed in Cairo early in September and on the 25th it moved to Baggush, with Rear HQ at El Daba. At midnight, 26–27 Sep 1941, it was redesignated Eighth Army Headquarters, with 13

and 30 Corps under its command, to which the [Tobruk](#) garrison was added in October.

More crusader details were revealed at a conference at Army Headquarters on 6 October attended by divisional and corps commanders and corps and army staff officers. [General Freyberg](#) listened intently as the plan unfolded but said nothing until the New Zealand Division was discussed. With a superiority in tanks of five to four (not counting the I tanks), as it was now estimated, Eighth Army proposed to fight the opening and decisive battle with part of the armoured corps only—two out of the three armoured brigades, the third having a dual role which might make it unavailable. Since all depended on the outcome of this armoured clash, the confidence thus reposed in two armoured brigades to achieve the main purpose of the campaign almost unaided is as remarkable in its way as the time wasted on Auchinleck's Gulf of [Sirte](#) alternative. Both indicate a readiness to abandon accepted principles which is hard to explain even years after the event. Those chiefly concerned must have looked on their new-found freedom from supply limitations and the extreme mobility of their forces on the desert plateau as a licence to ignore the principle of concentration of force or the tactical importance of ground. Neglect of the latter was obscured at this stage by the vagueness of the proposals put forward for the armoured force which specified, reasonably enough, that the British armour would accomplish its mission by 'threatening the forces investing [TOBRUK](#) in order to make the enemy deploy his armd forces' but did not venture into details. If the intention was to concentrate on vital ground, as many of those present no doubt imagined, all should be well; but this was later found not to be the case.

[Freyberg](#) was unwittingly first to cast doubt on it. His division, as part of the infantry corps, ¹ was to drive behind the frontier strongpoints to isolate them from the main battle and he was not at all in favour of such a move while there was any likelihood that strong panzer formations might oppose it. The dual role of one of the armoured brigades—to co-operate with either the infantry or the armoured corps as the situation demanded—was not in itself sufficient. 'I made it clear', he says, 'that I did not agree ... to go out into the blue against unbeaten armoured formations.' That the armoured brigade would be 'in support', he added, 'meant nothing to me, as they would be ordered away in a crisis and ... unless we had tanks under our immediate command we should not be moved across the [frontier] wire until the armoured

battle had commenced.'

¹ 13 Corps, with NZ and 4 Indian Divisions and 1 (Army) Tank Bde (with I tanks and a field regiment). 30 Corps was to include 7 Armcd and 1 South African Divisions and 22 Guards Bde.

The principle at issue was that infantry in mobile operations could not be expected to defeat a full-scale panzer attack and from this, [Freyberg](#) says, 'we never willingly departed.'¹

Thus began an argument, which echoed through later discussions at Corps and Army level, about the command of the third armoured brigade group. Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen, backing up [Freyberg](#), wanted it under his command; Lieutenant-General Norrie, now commanding the armoured corps, naturally wanted all armoured brigades under his wing; Cunningham was ready to compromise and retain direct command himself, which pleased neither side. The wisdom of Solomon was called for but was not forthcoming and the issue was never properly settled. That the armour and infantry should fight in close conjunction as a concentrated force was remote from current consideration.

The plan as outlined at this conference promised to disperse Eighth Army in a way that was daring, to say the least. Thirteenth Corps (Northern Force) was to make a left hook northwards to hem in the frontier positions, 30 Corps (Southern Force) was to drive north-westwards to [Tobruk](#), and the third armoured brigade (Centre Force) was to operate between them. The Tobruk garrison was to break out south-eastwards when the time was ripe to link up with Southern Force, while far to the south an unspecified number of armoured cars and lorried infantry with artillery support was to skirt the edge of the Libyan Sand Sea from Jarabub to capture Jalo and Aujila, 250 miles from the likely battleground of the main armoured forces. Such a wide deployment of forces was inconceivable unless it was a foregone conclusion that the enemy's armoured forces would be decisively defeated in the opening stages—an assumption not lightly to be made about German armour, with its record of outstanding success in many theatres, marred by nothing more serious than the rebuff outside [Tobruk](#) at the beginning of May. The official minutes of this conference are nevertheless quite clear on this vital point: 7 Armoured Division (with only two

brigades) would be stronger than the two panzer divisions put together and each armoured brigade would be 'slightly stronger' than a panzer division, the basis of the comparison evidently being a mere counting of tanks. That an Italian armoured division might also have to be dealt with was scarcely considered; its tanks, the minutes broadly hinted, were inferior.

The strength and capabilities of the British armoured force were matters for the experts and [Freyberg](#) was in no position to pass judgment on their assessments. At his own conference of 17 October

¹ Comments on my narrative, July 1950, again with solid documentary support linking them with his contemporary views.

he pointed out that the numerical superiority of the British tanks (now reduced to 5 to 4) was partly offset by the better quality of the Pzkw III and possibly of the Italian M13 too, though it was still thought that a British armoured brigade was stronger than a panzer division. What was proposed for the infantry was a different matter and in some ways worrying. Frequent mention of brigades instead of divisions and the detailed allotment of tasks raised suspicions that Eighth Army was too ready to fight with detached brigade groups, which would reduce the potential of the force as a whole and make inefficient use of the field artillery. [Freyberg](#) therefore specified at his first

crusader

conference with his brigadiers on 17 October that the field regiments were 'not to be decentralised ¹ unless necessary', an instruction which the plan as it emerged in detail relegated to no more than a forlorn hope. Dispersion was to be the order of the day and it was now too late to change.

Eighth Army tended also, he felt, to underrate the opposition likely to be put up by German troops. [Tobruk](#) was tightly besieged and it seemed to him that the final link-up with its garrison would call for more infantry than the plan provided. This task had been given to only two brigades of [1 South African Division](#), which had already served under General Cunningham in [East Africa](#) and was theoretically well-suited for operating in conjunction with armoured forces in a fast-moving battle. It was

designed to have a full complement of troop-carrying vehicles permanently allotted (i.e., it was 'fully mobile'); but the lorries which had served faithfully in the long haul from Kenya to [Addis Ababa](#) and beyond were not desert-worthy, and pending replacements for them the division was for many months without the bare essentials for training. The desert demanded an entirely new range of skills and techniques for navigation, movement, deployment and minor tactics (to say nothing of administration) which the South Africans had had little chance of learning, particularly while stationed at [Matruh](#) and subject to endless requisitions for labour on the local defences. As late as mid-October, therefore, the division was woefully ill-prepared for the trial ahead of it and was still short of 2271 vehicles. This figure fell by the end of the month to 1203 and was further halved in the next day or two, but time was running out and the situation was critical in the extreme. The division was not nearly ready for action and for less versatile troops the allotted role would have been out of the question. As it was, Major-General Brink of the South African division was only able to accept his commitments when Cunningham allowed him three more days to get ready and

¹ i.e., put under command of the brigades.—Minutes of the conference.

made it a matter of honour. Otherwise 4 Indian Division would have changed places with [1 South African Division](#), or so Cunningham said, though it would in fact have been even harder to get that division ready in time. Brigadier Pienaar's 1 South African Brigade had had first call throughout on equipment and transport and had managed to conduct two brigade exercises, but Brigadier Armstrong's 5 Brigade first assembled in the open desert when it moved forward to meet the enemy.

As if these handicaps were not enough, the South African division was condemned to leave its third brigade behind in [Matruh](#), a detail of the plan which attracted [Freyberg](#)'s attention. He was under threat of a somewhat similar sentence himself, since he had been warned to have one brigade ready to move westwards to join 30 Corps if the need arose; a larger force, he was told, could not be maintained so far west. This made him study the scheme for breaking through to [Tobruk](#), and the more he looked at it the less he liked it. When the time came he suspected that he would be asked to drop current commitments and make for [Tobruk](#) to help join

hands with the garrison. In such an eventuality he wanted all three brigades together, to develop the full fighting potential of the Division. As he wrote to Mr Fraser on 18 December,

the plan to relieve [TOBRUK](#) was not strong enough. It was entrusted to two Brigades of the South Africans with the Armoured Force.

Two days before we marched out to the Battle I asked for an appointment with the Army Commander and said 'You are attacking Five Italian Divisions and more than a German Division with two Brigades of South Africans and you will fail & we shall be ordered in the end to march upon [TOBRUK](#). We are ready to do so. All our plans have been made with that object in view. I do wish to say that it is imperative that we should go as a complete Division not a two Brigade Division as in [Crete](#)'. I went on to say that we had been trained to work and fight as a complete Division and as such we were only half as strong if one of our three Brigades were detached.

'I doubt if I made any impression on General Cunningham,' he wrote later to the Minister of Defence (6 February 1942). 'He thought I was over-anxious and I thought him over confident.'

With these reservations—that he disliked what he later called the Brigade Group Battle and that he was reluctant to move into [Libya](#) until enemy armour was fully committed against 30 Corps—[Freyberg](#) indicated no serious misgivings about the plan. At his conference of 17 October he told Brigadier [Inglis](#)¹ that it was 'good

¹ [Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis](#), CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, VD, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk); [Hamilton](#); born [Mosgiel](#), 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn, Dec 1939—Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde, 1941–42, and 4 Armd Bde, 1942–44; GOC 2 NZ Div, 27 Jun—16 Aug 1942, 6 Jun—31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, [Germany](#), 1947–50; Stipendiary Magistrate.

to be going into a well planned campaign at last'.¹ Even after the campaign [Freyberg](#) wrote (to Mr Fraser) that the 'plan they had worked out was a very good

one. ...' He warned the Defence Minister on 9 October of heavy fighting ahead and concluded that in the circumstances 'proposed operations difficult but offer good chance success.' Battle plans embody prophecies and the main forecast of the crusader

plan, that the first great tank clash would be decisive, seemed reasonable enough. As he explained in the same cable,

This like all modern battles is in first place battle of machines and exploitation by lorry borne fighting troops of all arms. ²

Had he been party to the discussions which settled the details of the armoured corps plan and the sally from [Tobruk](#) he might have felt rather less confident.

ii

The plan for the armoured corps was a curious mixture, reflecting, long-standing uncertainties of armoured doctrine in the British Army which left the main questions of command and organisation still unanswered. Differences of outlook between the cavalry and the Royal Tank Corps had not been resolved by combining them in the [Royal Armoured Corps](#). The development of two main kinds of tank (cruisers and I tanks) was symptomatic, springing from and in turn encouraging divergent and mutually exclusive schools of thought about their uses. Even more important, attitudes within the RAC had not led to harmony with other fighting arms—the gunners, sappers and infantry—which was a major ingredient of success in German mobile operations. The desert war thus far had raised false gods and nurtured heresies and frequent changes of command had gravely weakened the Inquisition. Successes against the Italians might in some quarters be scorned; but they were victories nevertheless, and how were the newcomers to know, for example, how much the British tanks owed to the tight divisional control of the guns at [Nibeiwa](#) and the [Tummar](#)s in December 1940, and how much to the eager and fast-moving infantry of 4 Indian Division?

Against this background General Cunningham's assignment appears formidable. With no established body of theory to guide him and no real experience of tank warfare, he was to take into battle by far the largest British tank force yet

assembled. Important parts of the scheme, moreover, had already been settled when he arrived—the establishment of his main striking force (7 Armoured Division), for example, and how the I tanks were to be used.

¹ [Inglis](#), comments on my narrative, July 1950.

² The opposite of the German doctrine by which all arms combined in the attack and the armour exploited success.

The Headquarters of 30 Corps, like that of Eighth Army, was newly formed and the plan was well advanced by the time General Norrie assumed command. Norrie himself was new to the desert and naturally took careful note of the opinions of the veterans of the desert war, foremost among whom was his old friend, Major-General Gott. Of remarkable personal appeal and bravery, Gott had risen from a battalion to an infantry brigade command and was now GOC 7 Armoured Division, an astonishing climb for an infantryman and testimony enough to the esteem in which he was held. But he was firmly convinced that under the new conditions of mechanised warfare ground had little if any tactical importance: the one essential was to 'keep mobile'. Of the misconceptions which hampered the development of British armoured doctrine in the desert this was one of the most damaging.

The armoured corps headquarters lost its first commander, Lieutenant-General Pope, and his two senior staff officers in an air accident on 5 October, the headquarters was not fully mobilised until a week later, and Norrie was barely in the saddle before he had to attend a conference with the Army Commander and Major-General Scobie of the [Tobruk](#) garrison on the 15th.

One of the worst features of the plan, as expressed in the minutes of this conference, was the treating of the role of the armoured corps as if it were a specific objective. The role was, as Cunningham wrote a few weeks later, to 'seek out and destroy' ¹ the enemy armoured forces, which put the emphasis in the first instance on 'seek'. This could easily lead to a wild-goose chase across the desert hinterland if the enemy armour chose not to give battle, and Norrie took the sensible view that he should proceed at the outset to occupy ground too vital for the enemy to ignore. He proposed reaching [El Adem](#), south of [Tobruk](#), with his armoured division on the

same day he crossed into [Libya](#). There, astride the main enemy supply lines, he could meet on ground of his own choosing the strong enemy reaction his move was sure to provoke. There also he could link up with a sally by the [Tobruk](#) garrison. Behind his armour would be [1 South African Division](#), ready to join with the garrison in rolling up the leaguers outside [Tobruk](#), and from [El Adem](#) the South Africans might well be able to swing north-westwards to cut off the escape routes of the enemy west of [Tobruk](#).

This was a bold scheme and, granted the assumption that the British armour could defeat the panzer divisions, a sound one; but Cunningham would not accept it. He doubted whether the enemy armour would be drawn and feared that it might move instead against 'our other columns'—presumably 13 Corps. The enemy

¹ Eighth Army Operation Instruction No. 13 of 9 Nov.

might, in other words, exploit the 60-mile gap between his two corps, a weakness inherent in the Army plan. The better answer was not to disperse the Army in this way; but it so happened that this weakness was more than counter-balanced by a built-in dispersion of the enemy's efforts between [Tobruk](#) and the frontier positions 60-odd miles away. The enemy was therefore poorly placed to take advantage of any openings Norrie's scheme offered him.

Here after months of privation was the reward offered by the stout defenders of [Tobruk](#) and the inherent tactical superiority of Eighth Army's situation over that of the enemy in [Cyrenaica](#); and for the first time administrative facilities allowed the British to turn it to full account. But Cunningham's plan would not permit it. Instead the British armour was to move a short distance into [Libya](#) and then wait and see how the enemy reacted, conforming to enemy movements and yielding the priceless possession of the initiative. Norrie protested, but in vain.

The main outline of the campaign as Cunningham visualised it is set out with admirable clarity in the minutes of the conference: first the tank battle, then the relief of [Tobruk](#), and then the pursuit to [Benghazi](#); but the details are curiously jumbled. 'Troops of N.Z. Div might possibly be the first to reach [TOBRUK](#)', says the opening sentence with prophetic insight not matched elsewhere in this document;

but no special Signals provision was made for this, nor was 7 Armoured Division to be able to get in direct touch by wireless with the garrison, though it might very well be operating close at hand long before the South Africans came on the scene. Again, 'N.Z. Div might act as a bait to draw the enemy armd forces out'; but why the enemy should react to a mere bait and yet not to the cutting of his main arteries at [El Adem](#) is hard to see.

Auchinleck chewed over the various alternatives offered the enemy at different stages and set down the results in notes of 30 October for Cunningham's benefit. He was emphatic that Eighth Army must make an 'obvious move to raise the siege of [Tobruk](#)' but this valuable insight was clouded with worries lest the enemy should escape westwards. Thus he recommended activities to confuse the enemy as to the 'time and direction of the main thrust', and he acquiesced in separating the main striking force into two corps fighting different battles and even, if the enemy chose to withdraw, in breaking up the leading forces into 'highly mobile columns' for the pursuit. One possibility, he thought, was that the enemy might post his two panzer divisions by his supply dumps alongside the [Via Balbia](#) between [Bardia](#) and [Tobruk](#) and refuse to be drawn even by a threat to the siege front: in this case the armoured corps was somehow to 'secure escarpment, picquet gaps, so as to prevent tank movement'—i.e., lock up the enemy armour north of the chain of escarpments on a front of some 40 miles—and then proceed to relieve [Tobruk](#). While ready for these eventualities, 30 Corps must be able to deal with the 'most likely course' open to the enemy, which would entail his moving

his armoured forces south of escarpment to a suitable area north of Trigh el Abd and west of [Capuzzo](#) with object of striking at our 30 Corps in flank and heading it off [Tobruk](#), his eastern flank being protected by his [Sidi Omar - Halfaya](#) defences.

In that event 'we must accept battle and concentrate the strongest possible armoured force against him in this area'—other than I tanks that is. ¹

Despite his confusing elaborations, Auchinleck was reasonably clear about driving with all available cruiser tanks towards [Tobruk](#) and thereby bringing the enemy armour to battle and (he hoped) to destruction, and he expected the garrison to 'sally out and assist main attack by threatening enemy rear and flank and distracting his attention.' ² But this was not what Cunningham intended. The garrison

was to take no part in the battle until the enemy armour was defeated or in course of destruction, and 7 Armoured Division with only two armoured brigades might well be fighting this crucial battle a few miles outside the [Tobruk](#) perimeter without any kind of help from either the garrison or the rest of Eighth Army. 'The day for the sorties will depend on the result of the armoured battle', the minutes of the 15 October conference state; 'this in turn may mean that the S.A. Div may not reach the escarpment [south of [Tobruk](#)] for perhaps three days.'

There was no way by Cunningham's plan of concentrating the strength of Eighth Army against the enemy's mobile forces. The garrison could throw in a considerable weight of tanks, guns and infantry, but only if the main battle took place somewhere near [El Adem](#), in which case one armoured brigade group would have to be left guarding the flank of 13 Corps in the frontier area, far outside the vital arena. All three armoured brigades could operate together in the frontier area if the enemy obliged, but this would allow 13 Corps a minor part and the South African division and the [Tobruk](#) garrison no part at all in the decisive battle.

Norrie pleaded at a corps commanders' conference on 21 October to be freed from the encumbrance of guarding the flank of 13 Corps, so that he could take all three armoured brigades towards [Tobruk](#), ready to 'strike hard in any direction'; but Godwin-Austen objected. The New Zealand Division would be in a 'most precarious' position

¹ Auchinleck's despatch, 'Operations in the [Middle East](#) from 1st November 1941 to 15th August 1942', [The London Gazette](#), 13 Jan 1948, pp. 376–7.

² *Ibid*, p. 377

unless an armoured brigade could protect it against a strong panzer attack and he wanted this brigade under his command while such a possibility remained. ¹

As time passed it became clearer in some quarters that the best plan was to despatch the full striking force of 30 Corps to [El Adem](#), and when this suggestion was raised at another conference on 29 October Godwin-Austen concurred (though in a

letter to [Freyberg](#) of 7 November he expressed himself as being 'a bit nervous as to the complete security of our left in spite of the Army's Order to 30 Corps to be responsible for it'). Such a move would inevitably attract the bulk of the panzer forces and he was prepared to meet unaided any likely thrust in his direction by German armour, up to the strength perhaps of a full panzer division. This was a solid concession to the 'go for [Tobruk](#)' school; but Cunningham refused it. He stuck to his scheme for the British armour to assemble at Gabr Saleh on the opening day of the offensive—a name on the map 50 miles south-east of [Tobruk](#) and some 25 miles inside the frontier. There on the evening of D 1² at the earliest Cunningham intended to study enemy reactions and decide in which direction to continue the advance: if towards [Tobruk](#) then one armoured brigade group should stay to protect 13 Corps no matter how much this might conflict with the main aim of destroying the enemy armour. Norrie could not see the point of standing at Gabr Saleh, which would not necessarily provoke immediate enemy reaction. But there the matter stood and on 9 November it was confirmed in a written directive to Norrie, followed on the 13th by another to Godwin-Austen.

In its final shape, therefore, the armoured corps plan was to cross the frontier at Fort Maddalena, 45 miles inland, after a carefully concealed approach march, and then drive north-westwards to Gabr Saleh, with armoured-car patrols fanning out to the Trigh Capuzzo. The enemy was expected to show his hand at once and Cunningham would then decide whether Norrie should head towards [Bardia](#) or [Tobruk](#). If the latter, then 'it may be necessary to leave a portion of the armour to protect 13 Corps'—a vaguesounding provision, though current organisation into brigade groups made it unlikely that a smaller 'portion' of armour would in fact be side-tracked from the main battle. Norrie was to order the start of the sortie from [Tobruk](#), but not until the enemy armour was defeated or rendered incapable of interfering.

In this phase 13 Corps was merely to prevent enemy mobile forces from passing through the frontier fortress line to threaten the L of C of Eighth Army. A motorised force was to be ready to drive

¹ 'Eighth Army Report on Operations', Phase I, Preparations (10 Sep–17 Nov 1941), p. 4.

² 'D 1' was the opening day of the offensive, 'D 2' the second day, and 'D—1' the day before, a system later changed to 'D Day', 'D + 1 Day', 'D—1 Day', etc.

round the frontier line, when Cunningham gave the word, and isolate this line and Bardia from the main battle area, its left (or western) flank being covered by 30 Corps until such time as 'this protection can be dispensed with'. The next step would be to release 'the maximum number of troops which can be spared' to advance westwards, to overcome any enemy 'who may have been cut off East of Tobruk', and then to come under command of 30 Corps if need be to help relieve the garrison. Some of these troops should be 'detailed beforehand' and made ready to move at a moment's notice. The reduction of the frontier strongpoints and Bardia was to follow the relief of Tobruk and would therefore conflict with the needs of the pursuit if any sizable body of the enemy got away westwards.

Norrie made a final appeal at a conference on 14 November to be freed from the task of protecting 13 Corps, and was told that this was 'really the same as the protection of the lines of communication of the 30th Corps', ¹ a reply which seemed to squeeze the role of 13 Corps in the opening phase into virtual insignificance. If the British armour was indeed so powerful that it could thus afford to undertake two such conflicting tasks with the confidence which the battle plan implied, it might be inferred that the motorised infantry would be called on for nothing more arduous than mopping up non-mobile enemy troops left behind by the victorious British armour when, in due course, their isolation enforced surrender. But this was not General Freyberg's view. It is interesting to note that Freyberg and his senior officers were studying closely a scale relief model of the escarpments south-east of Tobruk which he had caused his sappers to construct. He believed that this region, particularly Sidi Rezegh, where the two main enemy supply routes of the Trigh Capuzzo and the recently built Tobruk by-pass road passed through a bottleneck overlooked by two escarpments of paramount tactical importance, would be the scene of the hardest fighting of crusader campaign.

iii

This remarkable confidence in the British armour was maintained, too, in the

face of steadily accumulating evidence of changes in enemy dispositions which promised heavier opposition than had been bargained for. Two mobile Italian divisions were now known to be guarding the desert flank along the line of the Trigh el-Abd westwards from Bir el-Gubi, 35 miles south of [Tobruk](#). One of these, [Ariete Armoured Division](#), was now well placed at Bir el-Gubi to intervene in the projected tank battle or to oppose the relief of [Tobruk](#), and whatever its weaknesses (actual or imagined) it could

¹ Eighth Army Report, p. 5 (para. 11).

scarcely be ignored. Yet the documents, indicate a complete absence of anxiety on this account and it seems to have been left to the commander of 7 Armoured Division to make any special provision he cared in this connection, with the further handicap that [1 South African Division](#), which had been meant to cover his left flank, was as a result to be held back at El Cuasc, 15 miles farther south than previously ordered. The enemy was stronger, yet the South Africans with their valuable artillery, including a medium regiment, would not now be at hand.

The British armoured force which was thus expected to take in its stride the addition of another armoured division to the strength of its opponents was itself anything but homogeneous. Its most experienced armoured brigade, the 7th, was equipped with an odd assortment of cruiser tanks of various kinds and ages, including only one full regiment of the latest Crusaders. Another brigade, the 4th, which had successfully engaged [15 Panzer Division](#) in battleaxe

with the heaviest I tanks, was now re-equipped with American tanks which were light even for cruisers (and which needed special ammunition and petrol). The one brigade which was completely equipped with the latest tanks, the 22nd, did not reach Egypt until October and was further delayed by modifications to its tanks, so that its desert training, to which much importance had been attached, was drastically curtailed. Curious reasoning determined the following allocation, of supporting arms between these formations:

	Guns
Formation	25-pdr Field 2-pdr Anti-tank Motorised Infantry

7 Armoured Brigade Group	16	4	One company
22 Armoured Brigade Group	8	4	One company
4 Armoured Brigade Group	24	12	One battalion

(Each brigade also had a troop of Bofors light anti-aircraft guns and a troop of sappers.)

The 4th Armoured Brigade Group was detailed to guard the left flank of 13 Corps, which possessed an I-tank brigade and a mass of mobile artillery and infantry. The other two brigades, with a smaller quota of supporting arms and perhaps no outside help, were to 'seek out and destroy the enemy armour'. The Support Group had 36 field guns, 36 anti-tank 2-pounders and 16 Bofors as well as two motorised infantry battalions (each less one company). No BRA was appointed to 30 Corps till 19 October, however, too late for him to initiate a firm policy of concentration for the large number of 25-pounders in the armoured division. The invaluable medium regiment in 30 Corps was to take no part at all until the armoured battle was decided. Thus 7 Armoured Division was to enter the fray with three armoured brigades and the Support Group, all designed and intended to fight largely independent actions, and it was thought not unreasonable to hope that the enemy armour would be defeated by the loosely co-ordinated operations of two brigades, the heterogeneous [7 Armoured Brigade](#) and the untried and scarcely desert-worthy 22 Armoured Brigade.

It could be said of the contributors to the Army plan that, like a certain Biblical tribe, their name was Legion; but the plan was in a special sense Cunningham's own. It disregarded his Commander-in-Chief's main injunctions and Norrie's weighty objections (with which in the end Godwin-Austen concurred) and reserved for an army commander with no experience of armoured warfare or desert conditions the decision on which the whole shape of the battle depended. In effect Cunningham was making a highly unusual effort to plan an encounter battle—and with unfamiliar forces and techniques. ¹ Whatever its logical status, this aim was the perhaps inescapable consequence of the object he had given Norrie, to 'seek out and destroy' the enemy armour, and his confidence that it could be achieved was shared by all concerned. Nobody pointed out the exorbitance of the demands the plan made on his own powers of perception. With every device of deception the British armour would approach the frontier. Then it would drive 70–80 miles and the

reconnaissance units more than 100 miles on the opening day, still rigidly maintaining wireless silence, before the enemy could give any sort of indication of how he proposed to cope with the intruders. Only after the enemy reacted—and he had more reason than his opponents to hold his hand—could Cunningham make his decision. Yet Scobie would have to know this by 6 p.m. if the [Tobruk](#) garrison was to exert its strength next day, the best augured case.

This was an impossible condition and ruled out a sally by the garrison before the third day. That Cunningham was not altogether unaware of this is suggested by his undertaking to remain close to Norrie 'from D1 until sufficient battle information is forthcoming to enable a decision to be given as to your future movement from the area GABR SALEH'.² Wireless silence en route was not calculated to hasten the decision-making, particularly in view of the enemy's devotion to wireless interception for tactical Intelligence. The plan was silent as to how the momentum of the advance could

¹ The 'blower' was the main medium for passing orders in tank warfare, but according to a friend Cunningham 'hadn't a clue as to how to talk on the air'—a failing he shared with most if not all likely candidates for his command.

² Operation Instruction No. 13.

be maintained beyond Gabr Saleh; indeed, Cunningham was prepared to let the enemy call the tune. 'If he split his forces', the Eighth Army report quotes him, 'we could split ours', an open defiance of established principle, all too sadly in keeping with the dispersion of effort which was the outstanding characteristic of the crusader plan.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 5 – EIGHTH ARMY AND PANZER GROUP AFRICA

CHAPTER 5

Eighth Army and Panzer Group Africa

i

THE Axis leaders were also guilty of dividing their forces in the [Mediterranean](#) and it was this, allied with the huge demands of the war against [Russia](#), that was at the root of their failure to get adequate supplies and reinforcements to North Africa, the abiding weakness of their desert army. Air power was in this respect critical and the air strength at hand was enough had it been used in direct support of supply lanes. Instead it was frittered away in raids on [Alexandria](#), the Canal area, [Haifa](#) and elsewhere, and from this point of view the move of German air units from [Sicily](#) to [Crete](#) was a mistake. Thus by a world-wide effort in factory, field and workshop, on the high seas and in the air, supplying the [Middle East](#), slipping small ships through to [Tobruk](#) and occasional convoys to [Malta](#), and blocking the short Axis sea routes to [Libya](#) by all possible means—and by waging with relentless vigour the Battle of the [Atlantic](#)—the British built up a slight and precarious superiority in men and material for the coming offensive. A tiny fraction of this effort concentrated by the Germans and Italians on the vital sea lanes could have reversed this situation; but their advantage of interior lines, never more clear-cut than this, was thrown away.

The tale of sinkings between [Italy](#) and [Libya](#) was told by Germans and Italians throughout summer and autumn in the bare terms of official signals and reports or in sorrow, anger or despair according to the teller's viewpoint. Ships of all shapes and sizes sailed from [Naples](#), [Brindisi](#) and [Taranto](#), in guarded convoys or alone, to be awaited at [Tripoli](#), [Benghazi](#) or [Derna](#) with fateful uncertainty. In August *Nita* went down, then *Maddalena Odero*, [Esperia](#) on the 20th and *Egadi* a few days later. [Aquitania](#) was badly damaged on the 27th, and on the 29th-30th *Cilicia* was sunk, *Riv* damaged by bombing at [Tripoli](#), and the tanker *Pozzarika* set on fire (though its 585 tons of oil were miraculously saved). And so the tale continued in September (with two 19,500-ton liners, *Oceania* and *Neptunia*, going down), a brief respite in the second half of October, then a chapter of calamity in November when surface attack by the light

cruisers *Penelope* and *Aurora* with attendant destroyers from [Malta](#) was added

to air attacks and the lurking danger from submarines. Seven strongly escorted merchant ships from [Naples](#) were all sunk on 9 November together with two Italian destroyers, a disaster which the Italian Foreign Minister, Ciano, found 'inexplicable' and which left Mussolini 'depressed and indignant'. ¹

Though the opening days of crusader saw a further deterioration in the Axis supply situation, the long pause in the fighting had nevertheless allowed the Germans to build up reserves of ammunition, petrol and rations which seemed adequate for the operations Rommel contemplated, and his quartermaster reported accordingly on 11 November. The enormous strain to which his organisation was shortly to be subjected was unforeseen; but it proved that despite the almost incessant barrage of German complaints about Italian shortcomings on their L of C, the Germans had managed to acquire a considerable amount of 'fat' and were able to live off it in an emergency.

The long-term outlook for Axis supplies in North Africa had come under [Hitler's](#) scrutiny and he had taken the first steps to improve it some months earlier. The thorough overhaul of the whole supply system which was long overdue, however, was not easy to carry out. This was an Italian province and [Hitler](#) was well aware how deeply Italian self-esteem was committed. Though the Germans had already achieved effective control of operations in the desert they maintained (with occasional lapses) the somewhat implausible fiction that Rommel owed allegiance to the Italian commander-in-chief, General Bastico. The difficulty in the central [Mediterranean](#) was that the naval and air operations to supply [Libya](#) were conducted not from the fringes of the distant Sahara but from Comando Supremo in Rome. It was there, on the Duce's doorstep, that [Hitler](#) had to assert his claim for a controlling interest in central [Mediterranean](#) operations, a matter of some delicacy.

The first step was to commit U-boats, half a dozen in August and more later. ² Then [Luftwaffe](#) units were brought back from [Crete](#) to [Sicily](#) for convoy protection; the order was of 13 September, but the change took several critical weeks and was not carried out as [Hitler](#) intended. Then came the prime move: by doubling [Luftwaffe](#) strength in this theatre at the expense of the Eastern Front [Hitler](#) was able to bring on the scene a very senior officer, Field-Marshal Kesselring, commander of Luftflotte 2. By extending Kesselring's responsibilities in a vague fashion acceptable to the Italians, but intended to soak up by degrees most of the initiative

¹ Ciano's Diary, p. 395.

² Only four U-boats entered the [Mediterranean](#) before crusader started, but they soon made their presence felt by sinking Ark Royal (14 Nov) and Barham (on the 25th).

they currently enjoyed in disposing their own naval, air and anti-aircraft forces on the routes to [Africa](#), [Hitler](#) hoped to win his point. With Mussolini's concurrence the post of Oberbefehlshaber Süd ¹ was thus created; but the Italians failed to conform. Though Kesselring was no more amenable to General Cavallero's orders than Rommel was to Bastico's, he found his Italian naval and air colleagues stubbornly independent.

[Hitler](#)'s bid to win the battle for supplies came too late to forestall crusader and he was too attentive to Italian sensibilities to achieve his main purpose of a unified Italo-German command under Kesselring. Nor was he able to make his way to good effect through the political maze of relations with Vichy France and [Spain](#). The French North African authorities provided a trickle of equipment and supplies but refused use of the short sea route by way of [Bizerta](#), the Spanish government hedged on the question of Gibraltar, and an attack on [Malta](#) was as far off as ever. By attacking rather than waiting, therefore, the British were calling the tune, a situation to which [Hitler](#) was quite unaccustomed.

ii

However much [Hitler](#) might have wished to temporise in this theatre and concentrate on defeating [Russia](#), his desert commander was not at all disposed to sit and wait, and it was a blessing for the newborn Eighth Army that its desert enemy was preparing in the main not to meet attack but to capture [Tobruk](#). As the hot summer months merged into dusty autumn this long-contemplated enterprise became an obsession of Rommel's, and Italian apprehensions of a British offensive became a vexing irritation which made him less and less inclined (after sommernachtstraum

) to weigh with care any evidence pointing in that direction. The documents are eloquent on the inability of the Axis partners to see eye to eye on this point, though Mussolini remained anxious throughout to regain [Tobruk](#). Bastico blew hot and cold with bewildering ease. Gambara was opposed, according to Ciano, on the grounds that 'when we attack [Tobruk](#) this will be followed by a British attack on our flank at [Sollum](#) which he feels we cannot resist'; ² but in conference with Rommel on 29 October he gave every indication of satisfaction. A British counter-offensive or diversionary attack had in any case been carefully provided for by Rommel and his staff and they pointed out that it was largely immaterial whether the almost inevitable British move was one or the other; the [Tobruk](#) operation was expected to end well within

¹ Commander-in-Chief South.

² Ciano's Diary, p. 399.

the three days which they estimated as the shortest time within which either counter-move could take effect. What the Germans and, for the most part, the Italians refused to consider in detail was that the British might strike first, though Rommel admitted to Gambara in a rare moment of expansion that the forthcoming posting of [Ariete Armoured Division](#) at El Gubi and Trieste Motorised Division at [Bir Hacheim](#) had taken a great load off his mind. Even OKH Intelligence showed a remarkable uncertainty as to British intentions and was apt to see things not as Bastico saw them, but in an exactly opposite light.

Preparations of the magnitude required for crusader were impossible to hide satisfactorily and the steady advance westwards of the desert railway told its own story. OKH Intelligence reported on 8 October an ominous British build-up evidently intended for a desert offensive, but a month later on the flimsiest evidence it changed its mind. Rommel's mind, however, had long since been closed to everything but the [Tobruk](#) project. He had carefully be down in July five conditions to be met before the attack could be mounted. The first was that there should be no signs of impending attack on the [Sollum](#) front and no great change in British grouping there. Another condition—that there should be adequate air support—had

been stipulated also by [Hitler](#) himself, and Rommel well knew that it could not be met. None of the conditions were in fact met and at the last moment, with overwhelming evidence of an imminent invasion from Egypt on the largest scale, Bastico was near to panic. He wrote to Cavallero on 11 November (with a copy to Rommel) listing the unfavourable omens and begging him to reconsider 'in the minutest detail' the date for starting the attack, a matter which was supposed to be for Bastico alone to decide. By November, however, the priestess of the Delphic Oracle could not have dissuaded Rommel, though he continued to go through the motions of consulting the Italians. He had flown to Rome on 1 November and there, when Bastico's letter arrived, he was soon able to win Cavallero's support and extract from him a stern order that the operation must start as soon as possible. The tentative date was the 20th but a final decision on that rested as before with Bastico, a situation more in keeping with comic opera than with the heavy drama of war. Rommel returned to his headquarters at [Gambut](#) (halfway between [Bardia](#) and [Tobruk](#)) on the 18th to be greeted with a telegram from [Berlin](#) reiterating the Fuehrer's insistence that air support should be adequate. At that stage he hoped to attack on the 21st and the necessary regrouping of his forces was already far advanced; but crusader had already started.

Rommel's confidence in his ability to ward off an attack from Egypt rested on an almost fatal misconception that his own L of C were inherently more secure than those of the British. He had lived for too many months too close to his own situation to see its essential weakness and he assigned the line of frontier forts built during the summer under his watchful eyes a greater tactical influence on British operations than the facts warranted. This line would indeed force the British to move deep into the desert to outflank it, and he thought that in so doing they would inevitably expose their L of C to a counter-thrust. His categories of thought on this subject were naturally restricted by the material shortages which were his daily burden and the keynote of his very existence, and he could not conceive of the vast dumping plan for crusader utilising great fleets of lorries and techniques altogether beyond his resources. Thus he could not see that the farther south within reason the British swung the less vulnerable would be their L of C and the better placed they would be to cut off his own supplies at the [El Adem](#) bottleneck.

One detail of the Panzer Group Africa order for the attack on [Tobruk](#), issued on 26 October, gave rise to an odd touch of drama. Both sides had selected the same sector, the Axis troops to break in and the garrison to break out, and both went to great trouble to hide their intentions and achieve surprise. Each counted on striking the other where he was comparatively weak, an illusion which was soon to be shattered at a cost of many lives, providing a harsh introduction to desert fighting for newly-arrived units, both British and German.

The Tobruk garrison, as things turned out, was the chief loser from the successive postponements of crusader. The plan required it to be ready to start its sally by dawn on the second day and operation orders were therefore issued on 12 November, to be followed by a pause of uncertain duration. As the uncertainty was prolonged the pause grew into an uncomfortable hiatus during which Africa Division relieved 25 Bologna Division in the eastern sector, guns of all calibres were moved into battle positions on this front, and 15 Panzer Division, [Bologna](#) and 17 Pavia Division began to assemble for their roles in the assault.

Prejudice combined with deliberate deception to keep each side very much in the dark as to the other's activities and intentions. General Headquarters, [Middle East](#), was almost as reluctant to accept that an attack on [Tobruk](#) was imminent as Panzer Group was to admit of the possibility of being forestalled by a British offensive.

The Cairo authorities were 'not convinced' by testimony of prisoners in mid-November about Axis intentions; and similarly, when a Panzer Group staff officer read in his copy of Bastico's letter to Cavallero of statements by captured British signals officers he noted, 'These are certainly lying.' That the far-reaching changes in Axis dispositions passed practically unnoticed may be balanced against German under-estimates of the strength of the garrison which were, under the circumstances, no less remarkable. How far these erred may be seen from the following table:

Superiority of the Assault Force Over the Tobruk Garrison ¹

	In number of tanks	In light guns	In heavy guns	In infantry battalion
Estimated	3½ times	Twice	10 times	2½ times
Actual	Roughly equal	Twice	8 times	Twice

Thus what was estimated to be a comfortable margin of superiority for the assault on which Rommel was prepared to stake his whole reputation was in reality rather different. Even his great predominance in artillery was worth less than its face value in view of organisational and doctrinal obstacles to its use in proper concentration at the point of assault. Moreover, the garrison disposed of heavy anti-aircraft and coast guns, many of which could be used landwards. In numbers of British tanks the final estimate was nearly 90 short, and 69 of these were Matilda tanks, the kind which had inflicted heavy losses on [15 Panzer Division](#) in battleaxe. In infantry he had to rely on ill-equipped and under-strength Italian units for 13 of his 20 attacking battalions. A surprise was surely in store for him if only Eighth Army held its hand.

But this was not to be. The earliest Rommel could attack was the 21st;² and the longest respite Cunningham dare grant the South Africans was until the 18th. By this narrow margin crusader prevailed and the assault on [Tobruk](#) became a desert mirage, flickering and fading in Rommel's eyes until seven months later, in very different circumstances, it suddenly materialised.

iv

When Sir Winston Churchill wrote of Auchinleck's failure to mount crusader

by September 1941 at the latest as 'a mistake and a misfortune'³ he was expressing his faith in action as opposed to delay, in vigour rather than passivity. But the delay gave Auchinleck a greater increment of strength than his desert enemies and it was

¹ Estimates by Panzer Group to OKW, 1 Nov 1941, compared with actual strength.

² A firm date for the assault on [Tobruk](#) had not actually been set when crusader opened.

³ [The Grand Alliance](#), p. 364.

not until mid-November that he could field an army with reasonable prospects of success. Even then the margin was slim and the haste in some ways excessive.

As late as the end of September, when Eighth Army was born, British strength in the desert was little greater than it had been before battleaxe; in some respects it was less. By mid-November cruiser-tank units and mobile infantry were trebled and the number of I tanks doubled and administrative backing allowed considerable freedom of manoeuvre, while the level of training, though still in many ways disappointing, was much higher. The main German striking force, on the other hand, had changed very little. A division of 'positional infantry' had come into being and an army artillery command, and there were now five Oasis Companies to help garrison the frontier strongpoints. With the creation of Panzer Group Africa these German troops had strengthened Rommel's claims to a decisive influence on Axis land operations in North Africa. At the last minute, too, much-needed German medium and heavy artillery (up to 210-millimetre) reached the [Tobruk](#) front. But German contributions to mobile operations depended as before on the normal two divisions of [Africa Corps](#), which had undergone what might be called a partial face-lift. A reshuffle of existing resources with the addition of one or two sub-units of artillery enabled 5 Light Division to be redesignated 21 Panzer; but one of its two motorised infantry battalions was tied to the [Sollum](#) defences and its tank strength was still below the pre- battleaxe figures. By November [15 Panzer Division](#), with a full complement of tanks and an enlarged infantry component, was much the stronger of the two.

The increments to Axis strength in a battle of manoeuvre were chiefly Italian: 20 Mobile Corps, consisting of [Ariete Armoured Division](#) backed by Trieste Motorised, arrived at the last minute in the forward area. Both of these divisions, however, were woefully deficient in guns, transport and essential services and the tanks of Ariete (Italian M13s) inspired no confidence either among their users or their German associates. The arrival of the Italian Savona Division in the autumn, however, enabled the frontier positions to be held in strength with less call on German resources.

The positional infantry at [Tobruk](#) ¹ and on the frontier was in its current form incapable of mobile operations and not really suitable for other than defensive

fighting even in static warfare, the Italians particularly so. Two of the Italian divisions, indeed, were not intended for anything more: [Brescia](#) in the western sector of the [Tobruk](#) front and [Savona](#) in the frontier area. The other three

¹ The Italian 21 Corps under Gen Navarrini ([Brescia](#), Trento, Pavia and Bologna Divs) and Africa Div which was to come under DAK (Lt-Gen Cruewell) for the assault on [Tobruk](#).

Italian divisions besieging [Tobruk](#), Trento, Pavia and [Bologna](#), were to be motorised when equipment came to hand; but at the moment Ariete and [Trieste](#) had priority and were still much below establishment. Africa Division had some of its supporting weapons motorised; but though intended as the spearhead of the assault on [Tobruk](#), it was an odd assortment of units in varying degrees of preparedness. Its infantry consisted of 155 Infantry Regiment of three battalions, which had been arriving since the beginning of June and was still incomplete and very short of transport, 361 Africa Regiment of two battalions (at least one of which was of former French Foreign Legionnaires) whose transport and heavy equipment was rusting in [Naples](#) awaiting shipment, and two under-strength battalions detached from regiments now serving in [Russia](#), III Battalion of 347 Infantry Regiment and III Battalion, 255 Infantry Regiment. By mid-November the divisional commander, Major-General Suemmermann, still had only a skeleton staff and a few vehicles, he was at loggerheads with [Bologna](#) about details of the relief, and his war diary viewed the early stages of crusader

with understandable alarm. Africa Regiment, on the escarpment east of [Sidi Rezegh](#), still had no anti-tank weapons at all.

The Sollum Front (as the Germans called it) was in rather better condition. Shortage of anti-tank mines had entailed a last-minute rush to complete the all-round defences of the southern strongpoints, 'Frongia' and ' [Sidi Omar](#)'. But the deep minefields from there to [Halfaya](#) made a formidable barrier, covered by the strongpoints of 'Cova', 'd'Avanca', 'Cirener', 'Faltenbache' ¹ and [Halfaya](#), with Italian garrisons reinforced by Oasis Companies or, in the case of [Halfaya](#), by a battalion of 104 Infantry Regiment and supported by powerful German 88-millimetre or Italian

75-millimetre HAA guns in anti-tank roles. Behind this line was a minor position at [Sollum](#), held by another Oasis Company, and the strong and well-manned defences of [Bardia](#). From 'Cirener' to [Sidi Omar](#) was designated West Sector and came under Major-General de Giorgis of Savona Division, with headquarters at [Bir Ghirba](#); but 'Faltenbache' and [Halfaya](#) were lumped, with [Sollum](#), under Major-General Schmitt in [Bardia](#) as East Sector, though the bulk of the troops in both cases were Italian. The whole front came directly under Panzer Group command, together with [21 Panzer Division](#) and two German reconnaissance units, for quick action in case the British did attack while the [Tobruk](#) project

¹ Named after Italians and a German who had died in the desert fighting.

was under way. This in turn led to another division of responsibilities between the German reconnaissance troops and those of the Italian Mobile Corps under [Gambara](#), complicated by the fact that the dividing line between the two groups ran diagonally across the line of advance selected for 30 Corps.

▼

The Germans nevertheless possessed one advantage which, in the event, almost outweighed all their disabilities: their anti-tank guns and tactics outclassed those of the British. In the long stalemate which followed brevity and battleaxe (when these German weapons were introduced) the British neglected to find a way of overcoming this handicap.

One solution, the introduction of a more powerful tank and anti-tank gun, the 6-pounder, was denied them; for it was only just going into production after much delay. ¹ The 2-pounder on which the desert forces had to continue to rely had only armour-piercing ammunition (solid shot) and as a tank gun was therefore 'reserved for penetrating armour', ² which restricted its role and narrowed the tactics of the British armour. With the larger gun and HE ammunition tank crews could have retaliated against the guns which plagued them, including the '88s'. As an anti-tank gun, moreover, the 6-pounder would greatly have increased the value of the infantry of Eighth Army, particularly in the eyes of those who believed that 'tank units were

capable of winning an action without the assistance of other arms'.³ As a makeshift a few 75-millimetre guns with 'platforms' like those of the 25-pounder were commissioned as anti-tank guns (one four-gun troop per battery in the anti-tank batteries of the New Zealand and South African Divisions), slightly narrowing the gap in performance between the British and German equipments. To complicate the picture, a few Pzkw IIIs were fitted with reinforcing plates which made them almost invulnerable to the 2-pounder except on the sides and these encouraged the myth that the British tanks were outgunned. Such were the tactical consequences of a decision, taken when [France](#) fell, to carry on making 2-pounders rather than to slow up production drastically by changing over to 6-pounders. Because of this decision, correct though it might then have been, Eighth Army had to face German formations which were much superior in anti-tank strength.

The Germans could therefore deploy detached elements—reconnaissance troops, for example, and flank and rear-guards—

¹ See Postan, *British War Production*, p. 194.

² As Brig Davy instructed 7 Armd Bde on 17 Nov.

³ Wilson, [Eight Years Overseas](#), p. 28.

with relatively little worry that they might be overrun by tanks. This was indeed an advantage; for on the British side there was no such assurance. The 'go it alone' British tank enthusiasts (an influential minority in the RAC) were thereby reinforced in their views, and when things went wrong for them they blamed their tanks and not their tactics. At the end of
crusader

Auchinleck remarked to his Army Commander that 'British soldiers with inferior tools have often beaten ... enemies much better equipped than they were in the past, and they will do it again if properly led.'¹ In the present case, however, the inequalities in equipment were not great, except in anti-tank guns.

Two partial remedies of even this deficiency were already at hand: in the 25-pounder the British had a gun well-adapted to the task of neutralising the German '88', a clumsy and vulnerable weapon in its current form, and to a lesser extent the 50-millimetre anti-tank gun;² and in anti-tank mines the infantry had one means of holding tanks off their positions, as the [Tobruk](#) garrison had long since demonstrated. The first, however, entailed careful tactics for locating anti-tank guns and combining field guns and tanks in counter-measures, and no such tactics had been developed. As a poor alternative it was laid down that field guns should, whenever possible, take up positions from which they could engage tanks over open sights in an anti-tank role, a task which conflicted with the primary field role and for which in any case the 25-pounder was not well suited. As to the second, it ran contrary to the doctrine that ground had no tactical significance, and the fact that anti-tank mines could be lifted as quickly as they could be laid made no impression, leaving infantry formations with the desperate alternatives of a do-or-die action with field guns blazing away over open sights or ignominious flight.

Eighth Army was badly organised to meet this deficiency. The armoured corps which was to fight the crucial battle against enemy tanks had far fewer field and anti-tank guns than 13 Corps and had no heavily armoured I tanks at all. The British I tank Mark II, the heaviest tank in the desert, had long since acquired a reputation among the Germans and Italians of being invulnerable to anti-tank fire except at short ranges, and the damage it inflicted on 8 Panzer Regiment on 16 June was still fresh in the minds of men of [15 Panzer Division](#). Throughout crusader

the Germans were constantly reporting the presence of the much feared 'Mark II' (as they called the Matilda); it had become a bogey in much the same way that

¹ Letter of 1 Jan 1942, quoted by Connell, p. 421.

² Not to be confused, as all too often it was, with the short-barrelled 50-millimetre then mounted in the Pzkw III. The tank gun had less power of penetration than the 2-pounder or the US 37-millimetre (mounted in the Stuart tanks).

the Pzkw IV (the 'Mark IV') played on the minds of British troops. But its low speed and short radius of action were deemed serious disabilities in the armoured regiments, which felt themselves well rid of the Matildas when these were allotted exclusively to 13 Corps and the [Tobruk](#) garrison. The Valentines, which had a longer radius of action than the Matildas but were less heavily armoured and were vulnerable in their suspensions, were slightly less unwelcome among the cruiser tanks and they, too, were excluded from the armoured corps. The Germans thought otherwise, for it was a captured Matilda which led 8 Panzer Regiment, for example, in the attack on [Belhamed](#) on 1 December. After disaster struck the British armour in the early days of crusader

there were loud and long complaints of serious disparities in armour and armament between the British and German tanks, which illustrates that even after the event it was not realised that the most dangerous adversary of the British tank was the German anti-tank gun.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 6 – FROM BAGGUSH TO THE LIBYAN FRONTIER

CHAPTER 6

From Baggush to the Libyan Frontier

i

IN the New Zealand Division defence against tanks was much canvassed, but the true prophet here, as elsewhere, passed unrecognised. Anti-tank mines could be had in reasonable quantities and the new CRE,¹ Lieutenant-Colonel [Hanson](#),² had seen to it that the infantry as well as the sappers were trained to use them, as he firmly advocated they should. His propaganda nevertheless failed and the Division was not 'mine-conscious' in crusader and made no use of this valuable weapon. The New Zealand sappers were asked on occasions to lift enemy mines, but never to lay their own, though the threat of tank attack was a constant and at times overwhelming burden. Defensive minefields were too passive to accord with current views; they attached more value to the ground they protected than prevailing opinion allowed. 'porté action' similarly became the rule rather than the exception in the anti-tank regiment; 'ground action' usually allowed better concealment and more effective fire, but it smacked too much of static warfare.

In organisation and tactics the Division had a sort of semiautonomy, however, and some interesting experiments were conducted. Reconnaissance, for example, needed to be swift, far-reaching, and thorough; but the Eighth Army units concerned, the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry among them, were not equipped to fight for information against any but the lightest opposition—always a matter of concern and at times a grave weakness. Divisional Cavalry had only the lightest of tanks and some Bren carriers, and it was an interesting move to attach a troop of 25-pounders to the regiment at the start of the campaign, with anti-tank troops added as circumstances required. Other innovations, such as the counter-battery organisation,³ were common to other formations and followed

¹ Brig Clifton having been released on 18 Oct by [General Freyberg](#) to act as CE 30 Corps.

² Brig [F. M. H. Hanson](#), DSO and bar, OBE, MM, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Levin](#), 1896; resident engineer, Main Highways Board; [Wellington Regt](#)

in First World War; comd 7 Fd Coy, NZE, Jan 1940–Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div May 1941, Oct 1941–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, 2 NZEF, 1943–46; three times wounded; Commissioner of Works.

³ There had been a CBO in Greece but only an embryonic CB layout.

naturally from maturing techniques and an increasing flow of equipment. In still others the Division had been designated by higher authority as a suitable laboratory for experiment, and it was thus that the New Zealanders made a sizable contribution to the new Air Support Control system, the benefits of which were widely diffused.

ii

The days at Baggush, however, were in the main crowded with smaller triumphs¹ and tragedies and with mundane routine. Field guns were calibrated, bayonets sharpened, khaki drill exchanged for winter battledress, and anti-gas drill was carried out from time to time with less enthusiasm than marked the 'trial packs' most units conducted to find space in their vehicles for their manifold and increasing possessions. Three resounding echoes of Greece and Crete came in the form of VCs awarded, to Upham,² Hinton³ and Hulme,⁴ and Upham's was presented on 4 November by Auchinleck himself.⁵

Cunningham had already introduced himself at the end of September and made a warm impression; he was a personal friend of Freyberg's and had the knack of putting even casual introductions on a high plane of interest, while his gift for recalling names and details enriched later meetings. He seemed very pleased, in turn, with what he saw of the Division. Godwin-Austen, too, had made his debut as visiting corps commander and told officers and senior NCOs of 4 Brigade that 'it is a real privilege for me to be with you again—the last time was at Rhododendron Ridge',⁶ a remark well-calculated to endear him to the few veterans of Gallipoli in his audience. To the others he gave evidence, like Cunningham, of an articulate intelligence which augured well for crusader, and one New Zealand staff officer described him on this occasion as 'first-class stuff'.

As details of the
crusader

plan seeped down through the ranks, which they inevitably did despite careful security measures, all reservations and misgivings were filtered out and what was left gave no grounds for any but the purest of enthusiasms. 'An IO from Div HQ expressed the opinion', says the 28 (Maori) Battalion diary for 8 November, disregarding grammar, 'that resistanc would

¹ Among them an 8–0 victory over a South African brigade at rugby football on 8 Nov.

² [Capt C. H. Upham](#), VC and bar, m.i.d.; Conway Flat, Hundalee; born [Christchurch](#), 21 Sep 1908; Government land valuer; three times wounded; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ [Sgt J. D. Hinton](#), VC, m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Riverton](#), 17 Sep 1909; driver; wounded and p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁴ [Sgt A. C. Hulme](#), VC; [Te Puke](#); born Dunedin, 24 Jan 1911; farmer; wounded 28 May 1941.

⁵ For some amusing repercussions in 20 Bn see [Kippenberger, Infantry Brigadier](#), p. 80.

⁶ B. I. Bassett, in a letter home, 19 Oct 1941.

be slight if at all'. The same diarist the day before wrote that 'among all ranks there appears to be a gradual keying up of spirits, a certain buoyancy of feeling in expectation of action at last....' No obfuscations here, and none wanted! The general impression was summarised by the Field Security Section on the 2nd:

move to fwd area taken for granted, location generally guessed as [Siwa](#), details not known.

Morale excellent. Slight uneasiness about [RAF](#) [[Greece](#) and [Crete](#) again!] countered by evidence of [RAF](#) strength in the area.

Rumours—NZ Div to attack the Italians, the UDF ¹ the Germans. Move to fwd areas and an attack in the very near future accepted as facts....

That the Division would be challenging a power that was supreme in the continent of Europe and making prodigious advances in Russia was a reflection reserved in the main to higher levels. At the unit level the diarist of 22 Battalion spoke for the majority when he noted at the end of October that the 'health and fitness of the tps is good and the morale is high. ...' The men were well placed at Baggush to observe the flow of tanks, guns and lorries along the coast road and the numerous and heavy trainloads of ammunition and supplies moving westwards, a fabulous wealth of material with which to buy victory, and the complementary cost in lives and suffering they estimated lightly.

One detail of 2 NZEF policy created a small but dark cloud when it was laid down that 10 per cent of the strength of Divisional Cavalry and infantry battalions should be left out of battle so that in case of disaster a core of sorts would survive for rebuilding. This dismal provision was of course scorned and the initials LOB dreaded. Many were the intrigues to escape this unwelcome label, but usually in vain, and the second-in-command, three or four other officers, and some sixty other ranks were subtracted from each battalion. In Divisional Cavalry Major John Russell ² was classified LOB by special edict of General Freyberg, who knew that keeping him out of battle could never be a matter of routine; but Russell went in the end as a special LO. In the 20th an LOB gloom was added to Upham's VC embarrassment.

iii

While the Division's part in
crusader

seemed simple and certain at platoon level, as is usually the case with troops in good heart, it was the subject of ceaseless elaboration by the various staffs and of numerous conferences and discussions at the command level.

¹ Union Defence Force (of South Africa).

² Lt-Col J. T. Russell, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; 2 i/c Div Cav 1941; CO 22 Bn Feb–Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

Freyberg at first followed Cunningham's initial method of issuing no documents other than conference minutes and for his Brigadiers' Conference of 17 October this worked well enough. The Divisional plan was still fluid at that stage and only six officers were given full details. ¹ Moreover, Freyberg's mind was groping beyond the details so far disclosed to him and he asked his brigadiers to explore 'Protection of Col[umn] moving along an escarpment', an eventuality which high-level planning hardly held open for the whole Division. Freyberg flew up to Godwin-Austen's advanced headquarters for a conference on 1 November, had Auchinleck to lunch on the 4th, and passed on further details to his brigadiers in the afternoon. By this time planning was carried on under the security heading of 'NZ Div Exercise No. 4' and the staff work for the move from Baggush and Fuka was well advanced. The Division was to move a brigade at a time to an assembly area in the desert south of Matruh: that was to be the first stage of the 'exercise' and at least one New Zealand unit, Divisional Cavalry, was soon aware of its significance. Godwin-Austen's anxiety about his left flank led him to ask for this regiment to patrol the frontier south of the Trigh el-Abd to give ample warning of any panzer threat in the week before crusader

opened. The regiment therefore moved independently from Baggush with its outmoded Mark VIB light tanks and its perky Bren carriers on the 7th and 8th and took up its new role under command of 4 Indian Division on the 10th, with A Squadron forward.

The Corps and Divisional plans had by this time taken firm shape, with ample documentation, and what emerged was what might be expected of formations intended to mark time while another corps fought the decisive battle. A negative character predominated, effort was to be fragmented, and there was much labelled 'anticipatory'. Though there was some attempt to give vent to the surging offensive spirit of the troops, the sum total, if the armoured battle took its intended course, would nevertheless amount to extravagant waste of the potentialities of a force of two strong infantry divisions (with four fully and two partially mobile brigades), a

brigade of heavily armoured tanks, and an impressive array of all kinds of mobile artillery. But [Freyberg](#) and General Messervy of 4 Indian Division knew the Germans too well to conceive of the coming operations as a possible anti-climax to their long preparations.

¹ Brigs Miles, [Inglis](#), Hargest and Barrowclough and Lt-Cols Gentry (GSO I) and Maxwell (AA & QMG). See Appendix II.

The first task laid down by '13 Corps Instructions for Battle' (12 November) was to 'protect the L of C running westwards from No. 2 Fwd Base', but the detailed tasks allotted to Messervy hovered uncertainly between defence and offence and were more concerned with covering the right flank of the New Zealand Division than with guarding against a body blow aimed at the main railhead of Eighth Army. So lightly, in fact, was this danger assessed that Messervy was expected to commit his one mobile brigade at an early stage to an attack on the strong defences which anchored the south-western end of the frontier line near [Sidi Omar](#), to the detriment of his other obligations. This brigade, the 7th, would in the first instance shuffle southwards round these defences and prevent their garrisons from interfering with the moves of the New Zealand Division. The gap thus opened up between this brigade and 11 Indian Brigade in the coast sector was to have been filled by 5 Indian Brigade, occupying extensive defences—North Point, Playground and Kennels Box—which had been built to cover the vast forward base; but this brigade was also saddled with multifarious duties along the L of C and could not man these defences in any strength until some days after crusader started, by which time, if things went reasonably well, the need would have passed.

In the opening moves of
crusader

the New Zealand Division and [7 Indian Brigade](#) were to keep in step, the latter occupying a defensive position astride the frontier at Bir Sheferzen and facing northwards while the New Zealanders crossed the Wire to the south. As the New Zealand Division swung north on the first stage of its mission to hem in the frontier line from the west, [7 Indian Brigade](#) would conform by digging in at [Bir Bu Deheua](#), west of the twin strongpoints Libyan Omar and [Sidi Omar Nuovo](#), ¹ still covering

Freyberg's right flank but now unable to carry out any part of Messervy's third task, which was to 'Stop and destroy any enemy force attempting to adv[ance] southwards, south-eastwards or eastwards' between the coast and Bir Sheferzen. A battalion, 1 Royal Sussex, held back at first in the North Point area, was to move to [Bir Bu Deheua](#) at an early stage of the advance and its departure would leave a dangerous gap, the assumption evidently being that the enemy would either counter-attack at once or not at all. After the New Zealand Division completed the isolation of the frontier line, Messervy was to prepare his 5 Brigade for an advance towards [Tobruk](#), but it would take time to reassemble the brigade's scattered elements. Thus while Messervy had been allotted 1 Army Tank Brigade (less a battalion with the New Zealand Division) and far

¹ Called by the enemy ' [Sidi Omar](#)' and 'Frongia' respectively.

more than the normal divisional quota of guns, ¹ with the chief purpose of defeating any counter-attack towards the main forward base and the desert railhead, he was far more concerned with preventing the escape of the enemy in the frontier area.

The New Zealand Division was to cross the frontier and form up south-west of Bir Sheferzen by midnight on 18 November, ready to push northwards next day to the Trigh Capuzzo at [Sidi Azeiz](#), 12 miles south-west of [Bardia](#). From there patrols and pickets would be thrown out southwards to link up with [7 Indian Brigade](#) north of [Bir Bu Deheua](#), a road block would be set up on the [Via Balbia](#) at [Menastir](#) to the north, and detachments would hold the few crossings of the escarpment for nearly 20 miles westwards from [Menastir](#) to 'prevent any enemy forces moving southwards from the area north of the [BARDIA – TOBRUK](#) rd'. On a 30-mile arc, therefore, from the south through east to north-west, all movement by the enemy to or from the frontier line, [Bardia](#), or the broken ground north-west of [Bardia](#) was to be stopped. A raiding party was to cut the [Bardia- Capuzzo](#) water pipeline, but no other action was planned in the first instance to isolate [Bardia](#) from the rest of the frontier line. At the same time a brigade group was to be ready to move westwards to dispose of enemy groups isolated in the region of [Gambut](#) and Bir el Chleta, halfway to [Tobruk](#), and this might have to carry on to the [Tobruk](#) front under the command of 30 Corps. In

this case another battalion of 1 Army Tank Brigade would probably come under New Zealand command, and with it the brigade headquarters and 8 Field Regiment, RA (intended solely for close support of the I tanks), leaving only one I-tank battalion with the Indian division.

Until the enemy armour was pinned down or defeated, however, the New Zealand Division was to stand on guard in the best possible anti-tank posture at its station just across the frontier, covered by 4 Armoured Brigade. Then would come the hemming in of the frontier garrisons, the capture by the Indian division of the two [Omar](#) strongpoints, and if fortune favoured the New Zealand Division, the seizure of [Bardia](#) and [Fort Capuzzo](#). From there onwards the Army plan was vague. Thirteenth Corps was to help round up the enemy on the [Tobruk](#) front before doing much more in the frontier area; but [Freyberg](#) was assured, when he proposed taking his whole command to [Tobruk](#), that it could not be maintained so far west. No more than two brigades, the 6th New Zealand and

¹ One medium regiment (6-inch howitzers and 4.5s), four field regiments, two anti-tank regiments and three independent companies, and a regiment of Bofors, a total of some 300 guns, as compared with 172 in NZ Div (though exchanges soon strengthened the latter at the expense of 4 Indian Div).

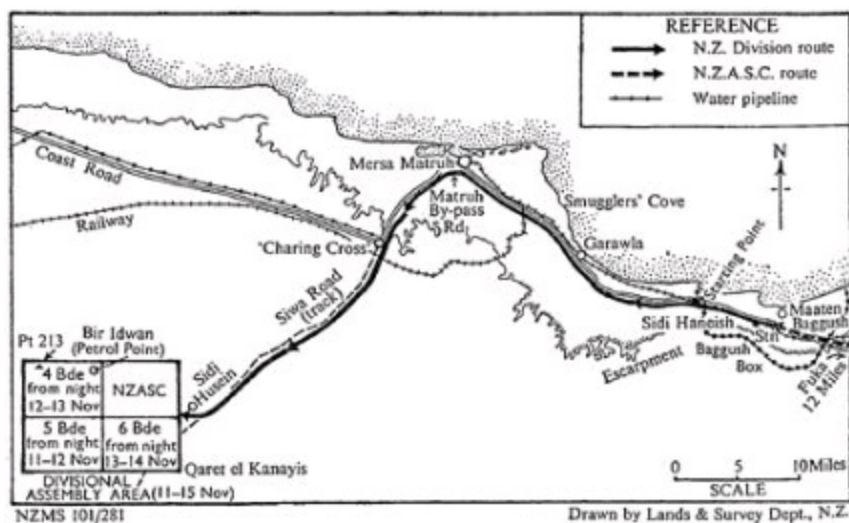
the 5th Indian (when ready), were at all likely to take part in the relief of [Tobruk](#).

An insistent question remained: was it more urgent to cut off the escape of the besiegers of [Tobruk](#) or to open up the coast road through [Sollum](#) to ease the supply of Eighth Army? Everything again depended on how quickly and completely the enemy armour was defeated. Delay would increase supply problems and make the opening of the coast road more urgent. There was, however, a third possibility that was earnestly considered: 'ROMMEL must by now realise his numerical inferiority and the desirability of withdrawing westwards nearer to his own bases for supply and nearer to his own fighter aerodromes.'¹

Units of 5 Infantry Brigade Group began to trickle westwards from [Baggush](#) on 11 November, Armistice Day, and [Freyberg](#) and a distinguished visitor, the Rt. Hon. W. J. Jordan, watched from the side of the road as the first vehicles moved off. The spacing was ten to the mile and the speed on the road 15 miles in the hour, which would have made a column more than 100 miles long but for the fact that the total distance to be covered was in most cases no more than 60–70 miles—along the coast road, the [Matruh](#) by-pass, and then the [Siwa](#) road, from which units branched off westwards into the desert for up to 12 miles to their places in the divisional assembly area. There units dug in facing west and after a hot meal settled down to sleep. Next morning 4 Infantry Brigade Group set out, followed by Divisional Headquarters Group (though [Freyberg](#)

¹ Appreciation by Capt R. M. Bell, GSO III (I), 10 Nov.

stayed behind), and took up position in the assembly area; it was a trying journey, with much other traffic on the coast road and much dust flying in the rough desert stretch. On the 13th [Freyberg](#) rose early and took to his car the same bag he had carried into the Battle of the Ancre twenty-five years ago to the day. ¹ He enjoyed a fast drive and was in time for breakfast at the new area; but 6 Infantry Brigade Group which followed found the road congested with other traffic and it was long past midnight when all detachments came to rest, some of them still short of their destination.



THE MOVE TO THE ASSEMBLY AREA, 11-14 NOVEMBER 1941

THE MOVE TO THE ASSEMBLY AREA, 11-14 NOVEMBER 1941

By next morning practically the whole of the Division was for the first time assembled as a complete entity, an historic occasion. In an area twelve miles by eight the 2800-odd vehicles rested 200 yards apart in brigade laagers, with clusters of men among them, and here and there a staff car or truck tearing a thin ribbon of dust from the flat, scrub-covered desert. The troops rested as much as possible and enjoyed the clear, warm day. The unhurried routine included distributing rations, water and POL,² cleaning weapons and overhauling equipment. Workshops in 5 Brigade worked hard repairing broken springs, Intelligence sections collected information and marked maps, and there were several conferences.

[Freyberg](#) took the opportunity to call together all his officers down to company commanders and tell them what he thought fit about crusader

. 'No battle is easy', he began. 'This one promises to be a very tough one.' The Germans were on the defensive and would pick their ground well. 'They realise the value of AFVs', he added, 'and they will not hesitate to use them in a desperate counter stroke.' He did not think the Germans would risk fighting in the open and considered they would rely on aircraft and anti-tank guns to reduce British tank strength and then 'launch Counter stroke to re-establish his line at [SIDI OMAR](#) and [HALFAYA](#) position.'³ He was confident, however, that troops determined to fight hard would beat the Germans, who had relied hitherto on aircraft and tanks to win their battles for them. The Italian army and air force were, moreover, weak links. The Tobruk garrison, on the other hand, was strong and might possibly be 'the deciding factor'. [Freyberg](#) outlined the preliminary moves, 50–60 miles by day on the 15th, a slow and cautious 16–20 miles in the night of the 16th–17th, and 15 miles the following night and then across the frontier after dark on the 18th ready to advance at dawn. The Corps task was to cut off the garrisons of [Bardia](#), [Sollum](#), [Sidi Omar](#) and [Halfaya](#) and 'at a later stage to destroy them', but everything depended on whether

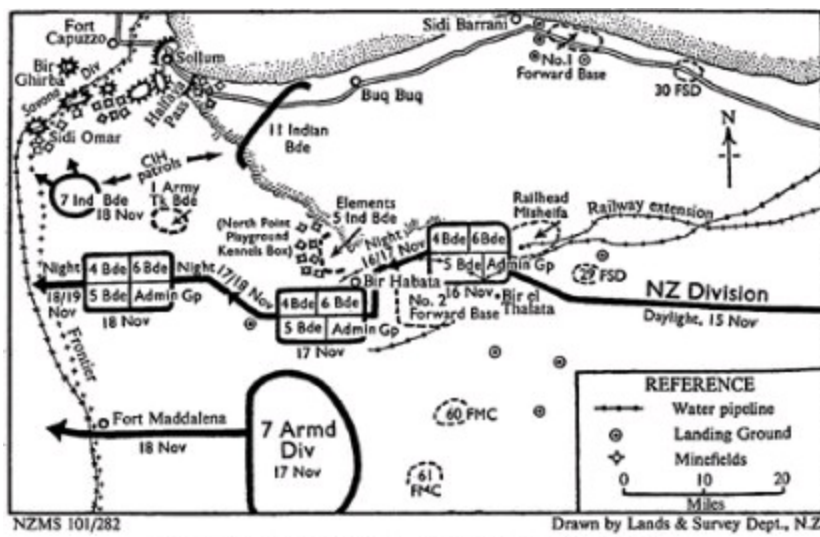
¹ He was soon to see fighting as fierce as at Beaumont-Hamel in that battle where he won his VC.

² Petrol, oil and lubricants.

the enemy chose to fight forward in defence of these positions or to leave them for a time to their own resources and fight the armoured battle 'in rear position South of TOBRUK'. The opposing air forces were evenly matched and the RAF could not provide close support until its fighters gained the upper hand. Air attack would be a constant threat, to be overcome by dispersion and controlled fire, but not when tank attack also threatened: this was more formidable and vehicles would close in to form smaller perimeters and 'increase Gun support'. Battle routine would henceforth be strictly enforced, brigades would halt in battle order, troops would dig in at once, and anti-tank and LAA guns would take up positions accordingly. After a special plea for units to send back all possible information at every stage of the battle, Freyberg ended characteristically. The battle had to be 'fought out to a finish, in the end ruthlessly.'

Spirit of the B.B. ¹ wins. You must prepare everybody for it both mentally as well as physically. ²

Parties left in the afternoon to reconnoitre brigade and unit lines in the area which was next day's destination. In the present area units regrouped for this move and Divisional Administration Group (under the CRASC) came into being, with all ASC units except troop-carrying transport, Divisional Workshops and Ordnance Field Park, and the Salvage and Mobile Surgical Units, removing from the brigade groups vehicles they did not need.



THE APPROACH MARCH, 15-18 NOVEMBER 1941

THE APPROACH MARCH, 15-18 NOVEMBER 1941

¹ British bulldog.

² As a final (and still unavailing) step to encourage the use of anti-tank mines, 6 Fd Coy demonstrated laying and lifting them to the assembled officers.

It was not until next day, when the Division drove westwards in one vast array of 'transport, tanks, guns and carriers covering the whole panorama of the desert plain' (as [Freyberg](#) described it in his report), that the full emotional impact of its new-found unity, mobility and potential power was felt.

Looking round from any slight vantage point ... the whole expanse of desert was peppered with moving vehicles as far as the eye could see—and on the horizon fresh lines of black specks were popping up like puppets on an endless chain.... the country was very stony—great slabs of 'crazy pavement' at times and patches of scrub. No air interference but five Messerschmitts seen in the sun. ¹

The experience of driving towards the enemy in the company of nearly 20,000 men with no apparent doubt among them was as impressive as the spectacle. From the post- [Crete](#) depths the morale of the Division had soared to dizzy heights. Feeling of such intensity was not likely to be dampened by the minor mishaps of the journey, many broken springs among them. The rather clumsy performance of an exercise in

contracting to meet tank attack and then opening out again, which was included in the journey, was a revelation of inadequate divisional training only to the perceptive few, though it left 5 Brigade 1000 yards south of its proper course.

v

This exercise and the various layouts adopted by the three brigades on the move and at rest did, however, illustrate one aspect of the differences in kind and character between the three brigades which had emerged in more than eighteen months of corporte extence. Fourth Brigade ² had served a long apprenticeship at [Baggush](#) the previous winter and had most first-hand knowledge of desert conditions. Its accepted routines for moving or halting by day or by night were therefore in many ways superior to those of the other two brigades and later became standard in the Division. In organisation 5 Brigade with four battalions was the heavyweight and its greater mass was naturally harder to handle.

On the score of battle experience 6 Brigade had some leeway to make up, having missed the [Crete](#) fighting, and for the same reason it retained the largest proportion of 'old hands'. There were only three new COs in the ten infantry battalions—two in 4 Brigade and one in the 6th—and only one of these, [Hartnell](#) ³ of 19 Battalion, was as yet untried in battle. The weight of experience, as of numbers, was in the COs of 5 Brigade, three of whom had seen action in the

¹ GOC's diary.

² Now commanded by [Brig Inglis](#), vice Brig Puttick (later Lt-Gen Sir Edward), who had returned to New Zealand in Aug. 1941 to become Chief of the General Staff and GOC NZ Military Forces.

³ [Brig S. F. Hartnell](#), DSO, ED, m.i.d.; [Palmerston North](#); born NZ 18 Jul 1910; carpenter; CO 19 Bn Oct 1941–Apr 1943; comd 4 Armd Bde Jun–Jul 1943; 5 Bde 9–29 Feb 1944.

First World War as well as in [Crete](#) (and had between them earned a VC and an MC) and two of whom were members of the Regular Force. ¹ In terms of average

age, too, the COs of 5 Brigade came top, with 4 Brigade next (Hartnell at 31 was the youngest), and then 6 Brigade (with two young Regulars in [Shuttleworth](#),² 34, and [Page](#),³ 33).

All three brigades had attained some degree of unity of spirit which was consolidated in various ways by the characters and methods of their commanders. [Barrowclough](#)⁴ of 6 Brigade, for example, was a high-minded and fearless leader, still much the same as when he stormed the defences of Le Quesnoy at the head of his battalion in 1918. He was as ready now as then to attack Germans wherever and whenever he found them on the battlefield, and in this was well attuned to the feeling in his battalions that they had to 'catch up with' the other battalions because they missed [Crete](#). He was disinclined to delegate authority, and in this may have been influenced by the relative inexperience of his newly-appointed BM, Major [Barrington](#),⁵ on whose shoulders operational staff work would normally fall. Thus the main burden of work, as of responsibility, fell on [Barrowclough](#), and he welcomed it.

[Inglis](#) of 4 Brigade had commanded a machine-gun company at Le Quesnoy and, like [Barrowclough](#), was one of the first to set foot in that town. The methods of the two men—barristers and solicitors in civil life—provide an interesting contrast. [Inglis](#) had a confident and, capable BM⁶ and used him to the fullest extent, and he could rely, too, on the judgment of [Kippenberger](#)⁷ of 20 Battalion, another solicitor and a friend of long standing who had commanded a brigade in [Crete](#). Thus he felt able to stand aside at times and let

¹ Lt-Cols Andrew, VC, and Dittmer, MBE, MC.

² Lt-Col C. [Shuttleworth](#), DSO, m.i.d.; born Wakefield, [Nelson](#), 19 Jan 1907; Regular soldier; CO 24 Bn Feb 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; died [UK](#), 15 May 1945.

³ Brig J. R. [Page](#), CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; [Canberra](#); born Dunedin, 10 May 1908; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn May 1940–Nov 1941; wounded 27 Nov 1941; Commander, Northern Military District, 1950–52; Adjutant-General, 1952–54; QMG 1956–60; head of NZ Joint Services liaison staff, [Canberra](#).

⁴ Maj-Gen Rt. Hon. Sir Harold Barrowclough, PC, KCMG, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre (Fr); [Wellington](#); born [Masterton](#), 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (CO 4 Bn); comd 7 NZ Inf Bde in [UK](#), 1940; 6 Bde, May 1940–Feb 1942; GOC 2 NZEF in [Pacific](#) and 3 NZ Div, Aug 1942–Oct 1944; Chief Justice of New Zealand.

⁵ Brig B. [Barrington](#), DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born [Marton](#), 2 Oct 1907; insurance inspector; SC 6 Bde Mar 1940–May 1941; BM 6 Bde May 1941–Jan 1942; DAQMG 2 NZ Div May–Nov 1942; AA & QMG Nov 1942–Dec 1944; DA & QMG NZ Corps Feb–Mar 1944; died [Wellington](#), 17 Apr 1954.

⁶ Capt Bassett, who had served a gruelling initiation as BM of 10 Bde in [Crete](#).

⁷ Maj-Gen Sir [Howard Kippenberger](#), KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born [Ladbroke](#), 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916–17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939–Apr 1941, Jun–Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde, [Crete](#), May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942–Jun 1943; Nov 1943–Feb 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div, 30 Apr–14 May 1943, 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; comd 2 NZEF Prisoner-of-War Reception Group ([UK](#)) Oct 1944–Sep 1945; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1946–57; died [Wellington](#), 5 May 1957.

his headquarters run itself with only occasional guidance, trusting to his tactical flair to give good warning when intervention was required.

Hargest approached crusader bursting with confidence. With four battalions his 5 Brigade was the strongest and he was sure it would acquit itself well. All his battalions and his field regiment had lost heavily in [Crete](#), however, and new faces predominated. Twenty-second Battalion still had on its collective mind its withdrawal from [Maleme](#) airfield, which was not without its effect on Hargest himself. He was on record as 'one of the finest soldiers in the Division' in [France](#) in 1916–18 ¹ and he entered crusader determined to erase the unhappy chapter of [Crete](#). His staff was in the main the same that had served him through much adversity in that campaign and there was a warm bond. Hargest had had less chance than his fellow brigadiers, however, of getting to know the desert, wherein a headquarters was as apt as a fighting unit to find enemy on its doorstep. His reluctance after [Crete](#) to yield even

unimportant ground was in marked contrast to current light-hearted attitudes in the armoured corps towards the significance of ground, and of the two extremes Hargest's was certainly to be preferred.

vi

Freyberg reached the new bivouac area at dusk on the 15th and went through the latest Intelligence with Captain Bell.² The enemy air force was active, though not nearly as much so as the RAF. The GOC was still slightly uneasy about the air situation and talked it over with the RAF liaison officer, Wing Commander Magill,³ who was a New Zealander. One possibility he toyed with was of 'bursting through to Tobruk if things go well and taking aerodromes', thereby crippling the enemy air effort at least for a time. 'Indications are for an early attack on Tobruk' (he wrote in his diary), a welcome development, as the enemy might well get caught on the wrong foot. Bardia seemed lightly held, also encouraging. The one dark item⁴ was that on the latest count the Germans had 80–100 powerful 50-millimetre anti-tank guns. The night moves planned for the Division 'may startle the Boche', his diary continues. 'At present,

¹ Stewart, *The New Zealand Division, 1916–19*, p. 178.

² Lt-Col R. M. Bell, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Waipawa; born Penang, 16 Jan 1907; sheep farmer; IO NZ Div, 1940–41; GSO III (I) 1941–42; GSO II (Air) Feb–Jun 1944; twice wounded.

³ Gp Capt G. R. Magill, OBE, DFC and bar, m.i.d.; born Te Aroha, Cambridge, 23 Jan 1915; journalist; joined RAFAug 1936; LO to HQ NZ Div, Nov–Dec 1941; comd No. 180 Sqdn 1943; Operations Staff, No. 2 Group, 1943–45.

⁴ Other than the news that the Ark Royal had been 'sunk at last' after several premature claims by 'Lord Haw-Haw' on the German radio.

thing which puzzles is that Rommel has everything forward. He is going to counter attack. It is not a battle of positions, it is a matter of destroying one

another's armies.'

The impending moves, however, were already viewed with concern in some quarters. Travelling in low gear across rough desert had already used up 40,000 gallons of petrol instead of the 25,000 allowed for: 3¾ miles per gallon per vehicle in place of the estimated 6 m.p.g. The Division was more than 15,000 gallons short of current needs and the Petrol Company had to make two trips to the nearby Forward Base, working until long after dark. The complicated scheme for rationing Eighth Army also had teething troubles and the Supply Company had similar difficulties, so that units had to draw on their reserves. A full-scale divisional move into action was a different matter from manoeuvring brigades in the well-known hinterland of [Baggush](#). One difference which soon made itself felt was in the marking of the route for the night marches. A half-mile interval between lamps was adequate for the fairly level ground south of [Baggush](#) and for the first night move on the 16th; but patches of soft sand on the night of the 17th, defiles through small wadis, and several minor escarpments caused delay and confusion and the field regiments in particular had much trouble. One regimental commander described it as 'difficult, dangerous and hair-raising' ¹ and the small reconnaissance party which laid out the lights ² was much criticised, though the real trouble was that many more lights were needed for such uneven ground. By a trick of fate an electrical storm provided eerie flashes to light the chaos and stimulated speculation that the fighting might already have begun. This wild journey ended a few miles short of the frontier early on the 18th, only an hour or two before the armoured mass of 30 Corps 10 to 30 miles to the south surged through the Wire on its way to Gabr Saleh.

vii

As it approached the frontier, 30 Corps too had become no stranger to broken springs, nor even to broken axles. Lack of training and desert experience was only too evident in some units. Not until 16 November, for example, did the South Africans make their first major essay at moving cross-country by night, and the arrival next day of what their historians call a 'Churchillian exhortation' ranking crusader

in advance with [Blenheim](#) and [Waterloo](#) can have done little to soothe the feelings of those charged with the task of

¹ Lt-Col Weir of 6 Fd Regt.

² The Div IO, the Engineer IO, most of the Provost Coy, and several others.

repairing the damaged guns or vehicles. ¹ To many others this stretch of desert was only too familiar and night travel no more than a routine, enlivened by the breathless excitement of the occasion. Thus it was with the skilful reconnaissance units which led the offensive and needed no charitable moon to light their way.

More than 80 miles to the south, 'Force E' of the Oases Group under Brigadier D. W. Reid ² got ready to leave Jarabub on a long and lonely trek to the distant oases of Jalo and Aujila. Some 300 miles north-west a small band of desperadoes delivered by submarine made a brave but clumsy attack on what was wrongly thought to be Rommel's residence. ³ Two more groups were dropped by parachute to sabotage airfields at [Gambut](#) and [Tmimi](#) on the night 16–17 November without success. These far-flung activities all had one central aim, the recapture of [Cyrenaica](#), to which Eighth Army's 120,000 hearts were dedicated.

viii

Had the Germans not been so intent on their own schemes they must have discovered what was afoot. The Italians had been only too ready to take note of the various warnings; but even they failed to get wind of the vast moves taking place from the first week in November. ⁴ Daily reports to [Berlin](#) from Panzer Group Africa Headquarters in this period start monotonously with the statement 'Enemy situation unchanged', to which as late as 18 November only one word was added—'mainly'. The Intelligence war diary of Panzer Group reveals a singular obtuseness in the face of almost unmistakable evidence. The New Zealand Division was spotted from the air on the 14th and again next day, yet its absence on the 16th was merely noted. It had disappeared into the blue and evoked no further comment. The vigilant German wireless interception company, No. 3 Company of 56 Signals Unit, detected the move of [1 South African Division](#) from [Matruh](#) and confirmed it on the 16th with scarcely a raised eyebrow. When complete silence descended on British wireless activity on the

17th the German Intelligence relaxed, though the Italians were acutely suspicious. Bad weather had set in and no aerial reconnaissance could be flown. Nothing more could be done until it cleared up.

¹ Agar-Hamilton and Turner, pp. 119–22.

² With HQ 29 Indian Inf Bde, a South African reconnaissance battalion and most of an armoured-car regiment, field, anti-tank and LAA batteries, a section of sappers and miners, and an Indian infantry battalion.

³ See Kay, *The Long Range Desert Group in Libya, 1940–41* ([War History Branch](#) Episodes and Studies), pp. 30–2, and [Elizabeth Keyes](#), Geoffrey Keyes, VC. Keyes earned his posthumous VC in this raid.

⁴ De Giorgis of Savona Div thought an 'enemy offensive to be imminent' as early as 14 Nov and issued orders accordingly. See Manzetti, *Seconda offensiva britannica in Africa settentrionale e ripiegamento italo-tedesco nella Sirtica orientale, 18 Novembre 1941–17 Gennaio 1942*, the Italian general staff history.

Yet the best evidence of all was solemnly recorded in Panzer Group records without a suspicion of its real significance. The fact is that the [RAF](#) had given the enemy clear warning of coming events which the Germans refused to see in any other way than as a reaction to their preliminary moves for the attack on [Tobruk](#) (which they characteristically supposed had been disclosed to the British by treachery). The switching of [RAF](#) targets from distant ports and installations to nearer landing grounds and dumps in the week before D 1 was a marked change of policy: it was tactical rather than strategic and obviously so.

From the [RAF](#) point of view crusader began in mid-October in a gradually increasing programme of bombing from [Malta](#) and Egypt and of fighter activity to deny enemy observation of battle preparations. At the same time careful though incomplete photographic and other reconnaissance of the relevant area of [Cyrenaica](#) was carried out as cloud, sandstorms and enemy fighters permitted. In the last week, 11–17 November, bomber sorties against airfields rose from 38 the previous

week to 127 ¹ and fighter sorties from 191 to 274, though still well under maximum effort so as not to reveal full fighter strength. It was an impressive programme by current standards and comparatively economical; but the results achieved fell short of claims, in the same way that the achievements of the British armour were shortly to be exaggerated, partly through overlapping reports. In helping the [Royal Navy](#) to sink enemy shipping and in protecting the small ships supplying [Tobruk](#) the [RAF](#) made a valuable contribution to the coming operations; but land targets were less profitable. The vast spaces of the desert were ill-suited to air action against ground targets on any scale then feasible. Unless landing grounds were caught crowded with aircraft they made poor targets and attacks on army installations or troops seldom had more than a nuisance value. Aerial reconnaissance, however, was extremely valuable and Eighth Army was able to enter the fray with printed maps of enemy positions giving detailed information no more than a fortnight old.

Air Headquarters, [Western Desert](#), had been set up alongside Eighth Army Headquarters with a New Zealander, Air Vice-Marshal Coningham, ² in command and a staff dedicated to achieving supremacy over the enemy air forces in [Libya](#) and closely supporting

¹ 'Royal Air Force Operations in the [Western Desert](#) and Eastern Mediterranean, 18 Nov 1941 to 19 May 1942', Air Staff (Operations Records), HQ [RAF](#), ME, Aug 1943.

² Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, KCB, KBE, DSO, MC, DFC, AFC, Legion of Honour (Fr), Distinguished Service Medal (US), Order of Leopold (Bel), Croix de Guerre with Palm (Bel); born [Brisbane](#), 19 Jan 1895; 1 [NZEAF](#) 1914–16; entered RFC 1916; permanent commission [RAF](#) 1919; AOC No. 4 Group, Bomber Command, 1939–41; AOC Western Desert, 1941–43; AOC 1st TAF, N. [Africa](#), [Sicily](#), [Italy](#), 1943–44; AOC-in-C, 2nd TAF, invasion of NW Europe and [Germany](#), 1944–45; lost when air liner crashed during [Atlantic](#) crossing, Jan 1948.

Eighth Army for the brief term of the impending offensive.
crusader

was to serve the purposes of the Navy and [RAF](#) as much as those of the Army,

and the new Air Support Control system seemed to promise closer and more flexible air support for land operations than had hitherto existed. Planning could naturally not allow for the extreme confusion of the situation on land which was shortly to prevail and which made 'bomb lines' between British and enemy troops almost impossible to draw. Nor could the [RAF](#) planners hope for more than temporary superiority over the desert battlefields. Tedder, in stating his case to [London](#), claimed no more than a probable qualitative superiority by virtue of the poor equipment of the Italian air force in [Libya](#), reinforced by a higher rate of serviceability in [RAF](#) units. Fortunately current estimates were wrong and the [RAF](#) did in fact possess the local preponderance in numbers about which Churchill was so anxious to reassure Mr Fraser. On the other hand, any advantage the British pilots could drive home against their Italian adversaries tended to be offset by their own troubles when tackled by Messerschmitt 109Fs, superior in performance to the obsolescent Hurricanes and Tomahawks with which the [RAF](#) fighter squadrons were equipped. Tedder reported that the moral ascendancy of the Me109F pilots had been overcome, but the flattering tactics adopted to reduce their depredations hardly support his contention.

Thus the handful of Me109Fs at the disposal of Fliegerfuehrer Afrika, Major-General Froehlich, were able to achieve an effect out of proportion to their numbers. Some such advantage was urgently needed, as it was only too clear to the Axis leaders (as it was not to their opponents) that they had many fewer bombers and fighters in the desert than the [RAF](#). Last-minute allocations of more [Luftwaffe](#) units would rectify this for the [Tobruk](#) operation but would still leave the [Sollum](#) front weak in air cover in the opinion of Reichsmarschall [Goering](#), as OKW advised on 1 November. In Rommel's absence Cruewell nevertheless committed Panzer Group Africa to the [Tobruk](#) attack and reposed every confidence in the ability of the frontier line to hold out for a few days against British counter-attacks, even by strong tank forces.

Froehlich's situation was unusual. He was under the command not of Rommel but of General Geissler of X Flying Corps in [Sicily](#), and so far as the Italians were concerned his powers were restricted to co-ordinating the operations of the [Luftwaffe](#) units in North Africa with those of the forward units of General Marchesi's 5 Air Fleet. This nevertheless seems to have worked fairly well and the Italians were

particularly pleased with the Stukas Geissler gave them. Their own aircraft were inferior and it was good for their morale to have German crews operating alongside them and perhaps one or two Me109Fs overhead. Froehlich was not in the habit of setting up shop alongside Rommel's headquarters, however, and the absence of a close understanding between the two, in marked contrast to the co-operation between the two Axis air forces, became only too obvious at times. So long as the [RAF](#) fighters were mainly based east of [Sidi Barrani](#) no serious repercussions ensued and the Axis air commands were able to make good use of their slender forces ¹ in attacking [Tobruk](#) and the ships which supplied it. But when the [RAF](#) fighter wings moved up to the frontier, as they did for crusader, their numerical advantage could make itself felt over the whole battle area and the loose co-ordination between Axis air and ground forces only served to emphasise disparities in air strength.

¹ Axis air strength in [Cyrenaica](#) in September is given by Manzetti (p. 24n) as follows:

Italian	German	
Bombers	43	'some 100 aircraft' 100
Fighters	110	—
Reconnaissance aircraft	15	Total 283
Observation aircraft	11	
Torpedo-carrying aircraft	4	

This is the same, if the [RAF](#) official historians are correct (Richards and Saunders, Vol. II, p. 173), as the total of serviceable aircraft at the start of crusader, the full total then being 436, to which might be added 186 in [Tripolitania](#) and 1400 in [Italy](#), [Greece](#) and neighbouring islands.

Tedder's total force of serviceable aircraft was over 700, two-thirds of them in the [Western Desert](#) and the rest in [Malta](#) or the Canal Zone and [Nile Delta](#). Of Coningham's 29 squadrons, six were South African, two Australian, one Rhodesian and one Free French and two were Fleet Air Arm.

For details of New Zealand airmen serving in this theatre see Thompson, *New Zealanders with the Royal Air Force*, Vol. III. One of them was Wing Cdr E. W. Whitley, DFC, who gave his name to the special force (Whitforce) assigned to cover the Oases Group and attack the coast road in western [Cyrenaica](#).

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 7 – A DISASTROUS BEGINNING

CHAPTER 7

A disastrous Beginning

i

THE British cause gained a valuable, if intractable, ally in the weather, which timed its intervention to perfection. 'Sandstorm, thunderstorm and torrential rain towards evening', the war diarist of Panzer Group wrote at [Gambut](#) on the 17th. Moving east from the Green Mountain, the storm struck the enemy first and for two vital days grounded his aircraft. Later the rain poured down impartially on both sides of the frontier, but Coningham's fighter squadrons far south in the [Maddalena](#) area missed most of it and remained operational. All along the coast there was chaos. Water gushed down countless wadis, carried away culverts, blocked roads, cut the railway west of [Matruh](#), flooded airfields and bivouac areas, bogged down guns, and between [Derna](#) and [Benghazi](#) brought all military traffic to a standstill.

The British reconnaissance regiments saw only the lightning flashes as they drove forward in the night 17–18 November to their various rendezvous in [Libya](#), and suffered no immediate setback to their high hopes. All had crossed the frontier many times; yet all felt a unique quality in this experience. They shared with those following them a remarkable upsurge of feeling. In the brief interval between the work and worry of preparation and the keener anxieties of conflict the spirits of Eighth Army units soared upwards. Even desert veterans felt a somewhat boyish excitement as they passed through gaps in the Wire for the crusader offensive. They could not conceive of defeat. They could feel, if they could not all comprehend, the historic nature of the occasion and no lack of the will to win would withhold from them success in full measure. They were out to gain if they could the first great land victory of the war over German forces.

These generous and general feelings were mingled with local and personal reactions to the details of the advance. B Squadron of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry pushed through the Wire before midnight on the 17th under command of [7 Indian Brigade](#) and came to rest, after 20 miles, just short of [Bir Gibni](#). The horizon at dawn was empty and the flat expanse of sand and shingle sprinkled with black dust and tufted with scrub seemed to hold no menace. But vehicles soon appeared

to the north, and after an hour B Squadron was lightly shelled and one troop gingerly engaged by what looked like light tanks. These hauled off when the attached 2-pounders fired at them and came back with two or three reinforcements, continuing until one was disabled, whereupon they quickly withdrew, towing the crippled tank. Light shelling and a spattering of MG fire continued for the rest of the morning.

The skyline south of B Squadron hid the mass of 30 Corps after it crossed the frontier, preceded by petrol lorries, and refuelled its 500 cruiser tanks a dozen miles inside [Libya](#), covered by [RAF](#) fighters. Still hidden from view, it then wheeled north and fanned out with three armoured-car regiments leading on a 30-mile front, followed by their respective armoured brigades. ¹ Behind the armoured cars and tanks came the guns and infantry and the B Echelon lorries, and behind these the artillery and infantry of the Support Group, with the Headquarters of 7 Armoured Division 20 miles south of the leading troops, Corps Headquarters nearby, and the South African division spread out over a huge area of desert many miles south-south-west.

All went like clockwork until noon, when B Squadron saw King's Dragoon Guards coming up on time from the south and was mystified when the armoured cars veered east and set about 'capturing' the right-hand troop. Their error discovered and no harm done, the King's Dragoon Guards moved on north-westwards with red faces and soon struck more opposition, this time genuine, by [Bir Gibni](#).

By this time all three armoured-car units of 30 Corps had run up against their counterparts on the enemy side, Wechmar Group ² along the Trig el-Abd and RECAM ³ south-east of Bir el-Gubi, and, lacking the gun-power of their opponents, had to wait until the cruiser-tank units caught up and majestically brushed aside this trifling opposition. Running helplessly before this tide 3 and 33 Reconnaissance Units headed for the Trigh Capuzzo, appealing for help as they went, and RECAM retraced its steps towards El Gubi. By dusk 4 and 7 Armoured Brigades had reached their allotted stations and the 22nd, held up by refuelling troubles, was ten miles short of its destination. No more than slight skirmishes had taken place, to which the enemy near [Sidi Omar](#) added a grumbling conversation of guns with [7 Indian Brigade](#) as the latter

¹ From right to left, KDG (less one squadron) leading 4 Armd Bde, 4 SA Armd Car Regt leading 7 Armd Bde, and [11 Hussars](#) ahead of 22 Armd Bde.

² Named after Lt- [Col Freiherr von Wechmar](#) of 3 Recce Unit, who had 33 Recce Unit and an anti-tank company also under his command.

³ The reconnaissance group of the Italian Mobile Corps.

moved up to the Wire. Faced with no more serious reaction than this, General Messervy promptly ordered 1 Royal Sussex to rejoin the brigade, leaving little or no infantry to cover his centre in the Playground area. Very few enemy aircraft appeared over Eighth Army, none could be tempted up even in defence of one of the main landing grounds of the [Luftwaffe](#) at [Gazala](#), and the [RAF](#) had to go as far afield as [Martuba](#) and Jalo to find enemy on the wing.

ii

The paucity of opposition anywhere was mystifying and the 90-mile advance of 30 Corps ended up rather lamely in a wide arc north of Gabr Saleh more or less as Cunningham had prescribed, with no more impressive trophies than one or two German prisoners and an eight-wheeled armoured car. The upshot was that at the end of the day General Norrie 'could not give the Army Commander much information on which to base further plans'. ¹ To Norrie this was not surprising, for it was what he had predicted, and he warned the Tobruk garrison by wireless that its sortie would not start next day. But Cunningham's whole plan rested on the assumption that the enemy would react quickly and thereby yield the information on which the next stage of the operations would be based. He was aware, now that the great weight of Eighth Army was actually in motion, that he could not hold back for long the various subsidiary but important moves which he had made dependent on an early and decisive clash with the German armour. The Tobruk garrison was tensed for its sortie, the South Africans ready and anxious to make their dash for [Sidi Rezegh](#), the Indians and New Zealanders were itching to close in on the frontier strongpoints and snatch what they could of them, and the ramifications of these projects were widespread. ² Yet the day had disclosed nothing of enemy intentions.

There was no solution within the framework of his plan to Cunningham's present predicament. All he could do for the moment was to indicate to Norrie (with whom he was travelling) a wish to relieve [Tobruk](#) as soon as possible, though he could not yet release 4 Armoured Brigade from its protective role on the right. But Gott had a mind of his own and after dark issued orders which effectively curtailed the possibilities open to Cunningham. Gott was worried about Ariete at Bir el-Gubi and directed the attention of 22 Armoured Brigade and the Support Group to that position, at the same time forbidding the 22nd to cross the Trigh el-Abd. This

¹ 'Narrative of Events', dated 29 Dec 1941.

² At [Alexandria](#), for example, the Navy awaited word to take to [Tobruk](#) the first large merchant ships for many months.

virtually left only [7 Armoured Brigade](#) free to 'go for [Tobruk](#)', and with 4 Armoured still tied to 13 Corps it split the British armour into three groups looking three different ways. Then came a Corps order giving both El Gubi and [Sidi Rezegh](#) as likely objectives for the next day and telling the South Africans to be ready to take over Gubi with one brigade and establish the other brigade a few miles south of it. Corps evidently thought the Italians might easily be persuaded to vacate their position and ordered bombing, not on Gubi but between [El Adem](#) and Ed Duda. Cunningham's wish to 'stage relief over earliest date' was also passed on and Gott and Brink were told to 'act energetically tomorrow'. ¹ The important thing, of course, was to ensure that their energies were concentrated on reaching a common goal; but there was now little chance of this. When Cunningham eventually reached a decision of sorts next morning that 7 Armoured Division should move north-west (rather than north-east) there were therefore the makings of a first-class muddle unless the enemy retired of his own accord from El Gubi, which was not likely. In the absence of evidence of enemy intentions, no clear policy for the next stage was possible, and when 30 Corps resumed its travels on 19 November it had no central aim, no single objective, and many incentives at various levels for dispersion of effort.

This was a sorry outcome to a day which offered rich reward. The weather

which had cloaked Eighth Army's approach made it doubly certain that Cunningham would achieve that traditional aim of the invader, surprise. Strategically this was more than acceptable; tactically it became an embarrassing handicap, delaying enemy reactions and trapping the Army Commander in a quandary of his own making. His plan allowed him no tactical gain from surprise and the command structure and communications put any far-reaching change of plan out of the question. Thus the vital ground at [El Adem](#) which could now be had at a cost mainly of petrol was left for a later date when it would have to be paid for with blood.

iii

Not all of this was a fault of the plan and Cunningham could not be held accountable for freaks of the weather, lapses of German Intelligence, or the stubborn refusal of the German command to recognise

CRUSADER

for what it was: an attempt, unconnected with current Axis schemes, to force a decision in [Cyrenaica](#). With no warning whatever of the approach of Eighth

¹ 30 Corps order of 'some time before midnight', as quoted by Agar-Hamilton and Turner, p. 133.

Army, no responsible German staff officer could be expected to believe reports of as many as 200 British tanks practically on the doorstep of [21 Panzer Division](#), and indeed those of Wechmar Group who saw these unheralded intruders scarcely believed their own eyes. When [7 Indian Brigade](#) shelled elements of 3 Reconnaissance Unit early in the morning the Italians were blamed and the German liaison officer with Savona Division was ordered to put a stop to it. Major-General von Ravenstein thought only in terms of a strong British reconnaissance and ordered a company of light tanks and a troop of field guns to reinforce Freiherr von Wechmar in the evening. Lieutenant-General Cruewell ¹ was rather more concerned, but at Panzer Group Headquarters Major-General Gause 'held that an enemy offensive was out of the question' ² and the two finally agreed that the British were only trying to harass the Axis forces outside [Tobruk](#), perhaps to delay their attack. A German battle group on its way to Gabr Saleh would take the British on the flank next day and

destroy them, though [15 Panzer Division](#) was also alerted. On the [Tobruk](#) front German artillery continued to move into position for the attack.

Rommel did not enter the discussion until eight o'clock at night (he was just back from Rome with final approval of his own plan) and remained as firmly convinced as ever that the British were in no position to forestall his attack on [Tobruk](#). 'We must not lose our nerves', he told Cruewell pointedly, and von Ravenstein was told not to move the battle group to Gabr Saleh. The chapter of woe from the storm was more upsetting than the doings of a few adventurous British patrols. Major-General Suemmermann with his makeshift division poised to attack [Tobruk](#) took a very different view, however, and during the night ordered Colonel Mickl of 155 Infantry Regiment to form a front facing south and south-west between [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [El Adem](#) to guard against a stab in the back.

iv

The contradictory elements in the orders at different levels in 30 Corps could have been reconciled during the night by more experienced staffs; but haste has its price and CRUSADER came too soon for the Corps and Army headquarters to acquire the necessary skill. Gott's headquarters, on the other hand, was of long standing and none questioned its proficiency, so that at times the tail seemed to wag the dog. Thus Gott's worry about his left flank, unknown to Cunningham and not properly realised even at Corps, led to a

¹ Commanding Panzer Group Africa in Rommel's absence, though he spent most of the day at his own D AK Headquarters.

² DAK war diary.

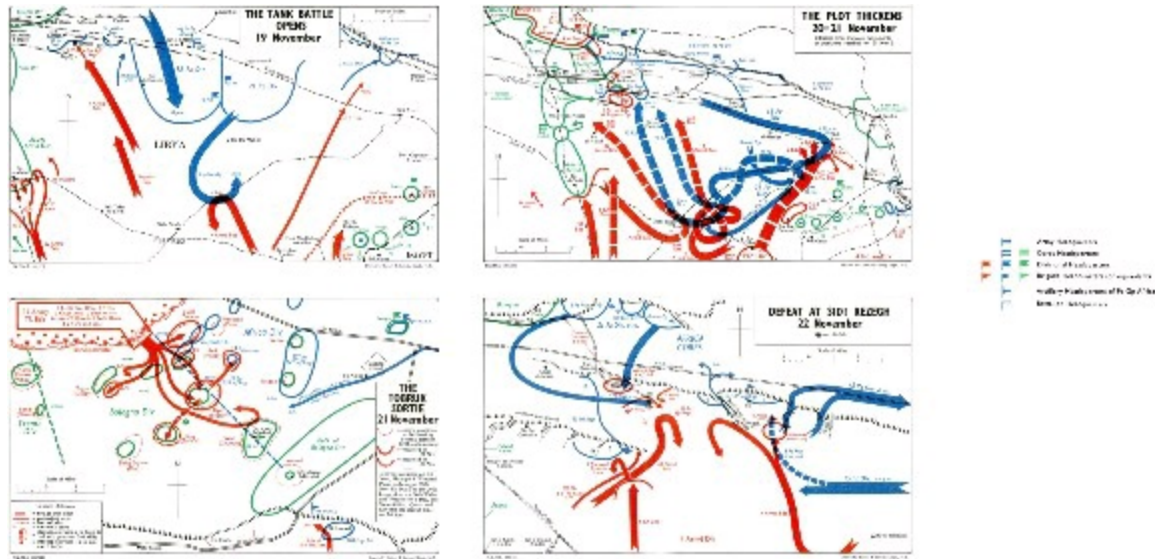
startling and disastrous departure from the Army plan and Cunningham's current intentions. While the Army Commander was still working up to his decision to make for [Tobruk](#), Gott was already on his way to join Brigadier Scott-Cockburn and his yeoman regiments of 22 Armoured Brigade. Before they had gone very far Gott caught them up and ordered Scott-Cockburn to attack Bir el Gubi at once.

The 11th Hussars promptly reported enemy tanks on their objective and the troopers drove on eager to get to grips with them, which they did at noon, with Royal Gloucestershire Hussars leading, 4 County of London Yeomanry on the left, and a mere eight field guns in support. Fortunately the Italians were not yet well established at El Gubi. The tank regiment of Ariete (the 132nd) had only reached there the day before, elements of 8 Bersaglieri Regiment were digging in when 22 Armoured Brigade arrived, and the bulk of the division was still to the north. The Italians were nevertheless able to bring down very much heavier supporting fire than was available for the British tank units, 132 Tank Regiment counter-attacked strongly in the afternoon, and the day ended with the Italians still at El Gubi and both sides licking fairly extensive wounds. Some fifty Italian tanks were destroyed or damaged and at least as many Crusaders, and the 22nd captured 200 enemy, six times as many prisoners as the Italians claim.

Such results would have been highly gratifying against either of the panzer divisions, but against a formation which was not even under Rommel's command (unbeknown to Eighth Army) and before the bulk of the German armour had been engaged they were calamitous, though sanguine first reports tended to hide this fact. Gott's impulsive action in ordering this attack without so much as consulting his own corps commander was at the root of many of his later troubles; yet such was his prestige that when Norrie joined him in the afternoon, after getting Cunningham's decision to make his main thrust towards [Tobruk](#), no objections were raised. That the El Gubi attack side-tracked and caused heavy losses to half the armour available for such a thrust was not realised.

The reports which came in to Norrie and Gott at the latter's headquarters in the afternoon suggested that the relief of [Tobruk](#) might be far more easily effected than had been imagined. The 4th South African Armoured Cars led 6 Royal Tank Regiment towards [Sidi Rezegh](#) against negligible opposition and the Crusaders dashed on to the landing ground south-east of there and rounded up numerous enemy air crews and ground staff. Two aircraft managed to take off but nineteen airworthy planes were captured, together with many others already damaged. Indeed, the chief obstacles to the advance of [7 Armoured Brigade](#) and the Support Group were patches of ground made soggy by the recent rain. The escarpment north of the airfield was left in enemy hands, but [7 Armoured Brigade](#) was nevertheless within

striking distance of the **Tobruk** siege lines and the immediate outlook seemed highly promising.



The Armoured Battle, 19-22 November 1941

v

From a wider viewpoint things were less satisfactory. The 4th Armoured Brigade north-west of **Bir Gibni** was still tied to the left flank of 13 Corps and the British armour was thereby split up into three groups, many miles apart, on a 50-mile arc at a time when the two panzer divisions were still within reach of each other. An essentially favorable situation of the previous evening had already been converted to an unfavorable one and the spectre of defeat in detail was there for those who chose to see it. On the other hand the enemy was little, if at all, better informed than Eighth Army or more judicious in his immediate reactions.

The looseness of command which had allowed 7 Armoured Division to break up into separate groups pursuing independent aims was apparent at lower levels as well. Thus 4 Armoured Brigade allowed one of its three regiments, **3 Royal Tanks**, to go chasing north-eastwards behind the King's Dragoon Guards in pursuit of German reconnaissance troops and in its absence the main body of the brigade came under heavy attack. A more accurate assessment of the position by the enemy could well have resulted in a rapid concentration of both panzer divisions against Brigadier Gatehouse's brigade with disastrous results. As it was, 5 Panzer Regiment with added artillery was slowly assembled under Colonel Stephan, and in the late

afternoon it was despatched against the left flank of 4 Armoured Brigade. The somewhat sketchy information on which this attack was based and its over-ambitious aim—to sweep round south-eastwards to [Sidi Omar](#) and destroy the whole of the British forces in this area—indicate that neither Panzer Group nor [Africa Corps](#) had yet got down to serious thinking about the new situation. Stephan Battle Group with its two tank battalions with 40-odd tanks each, ¹ one to the right rear of the other, moved off under the eyes of Ravenstein and Rommel himself and soon became locked in battle with what seemed to be a force of much superior strength.

¹ The official tank strength of 5 Pz Regt at the start of CRUSADER was 120, but next day it dropped to 83, a difference of 37 which cannot be accounted for in terms of battle losses and may have some connection with losses in SOMMERNACHTSTRAUM or with a wish to reassure [Berlin](#) regarding the ability of 21 Pz Div to carry out its role while Rommel attacked [Tobruk](#).

All efforts to outflank this force failed and frontal attack made little headway. After dark the Germans withdrew a few miles north, having lost eight tanks against 23 of Gatehouse's Stuarts.

In actual fact the two groups were fairly evenly matched (in the absence of [3 Royal Tanks](#)): Gatehouse had a few more tanks (113 all told) and Stephan had more artillery, including a troop of '88s'. What gave the Germans an exaggerated picture of British strength was the superabundance (by Axis standards) of transport, a recurring factor throughout CRUSADER. The Germans never realised that the huge British B Echelons were often more hindrance than help in the heat of battle.

The absence of [3 Royal Tanks](#), however, drew an unexpected dividend and perhaps saved Gatehouse from attack next day by the whole of [Africa Corps](#). Not only had [3 Royal Tanks](#) (with King's Dragoon Guards) holed up [3 Reconnaissance Unit](#) on the escarpment west of [Bardia](#): it attracted the whole of [15 Panzer Division](#) next day to an area which by then contained no more than one or two British armoured cars. Three British battle groups had been located, one heading for [Tobrunk](#), another facing Stephan, and a third on the way to [Capuzzo](#), and it was against the third that Cruewell mistakenly decided to make his main effort next morning. Ravenstein took a pessimistic view and preferred to hold his hand until the

situation clarified, as he through the British much stronger. Neither Cruewell nor Rommel would concede this and they still looked on the British operations as a diversionary attack; but their agreement to commit [15 Panzer Division](#) inevitably deferred the [Tobruk](#) assault, thereby yielding the British object if their diagnosis was correct.

The dispersed British armoured brigades were therefore given a few hours' grace on 20 November to concentrate against the German armour, either in attack or in defence of vital ground. But the indecisive outcome of the first clash with the Germans was claimed in some quarters as a victory and the grave danger in which Gatehouse now stood was not recognised. The next few hours could be critical and the battle needed firm control; yet at 5 a.m. on the 20th Cunningham flew back to his Advanced Headquarters in the [Maddalena](#) area. Communications forward from there were slow and there was no system such as the Germans used whereby higher formations intercepted wireless conversations or signals between lower formations and kept in touch from minute to minute with the changing situation. Without such an aid the British method of command was ineffective and divisions and even brigades were left to their own resources for long periods. Against an enemy who believed in tight control of operations this was asking for trouble, and the trouble was not long in coming.

Stephan Battle Group attacked southwards again in the morning of the 20th but found the fast Starts elusive and the guns of [2 Royal Horse Artillery](#) irrepressible. The British tanks were less anxious to close than they had been before and their long-range tactics and rapid outflanking moves ate up Stephan's ammunition faster than he could afford. Knabe Battle Group (artillery, machinegunners and infantry of [21 Panzer Division](#)) tried to come in on Stephan's left but was held up by KDG, reported as a strong force of tanks and guns. In mid-morning Stephan swung to his left rear to help Knabe and by noon, with almost no ammunition left, both groups broke off the action and withdrew north-eastwards. Tank losses were by German estimates eight British against four German; but British claims were far higher and again converted an indecisive action into supposed victory. Meanwhile 15 Panzer 'attacked' eastwards.

That rejoicing might be premature was soon learned when 4 Armoured Brigade

moved a few miles north later in the morning and was then warned that the two panzer divisions had linked up and might shortly stage a combined attack. This was just what Cunningham had sought to bring about when he crossed the frontier with all three armoured brigades and the Support Group at his disposal, and his decision to make for [Tobruk](#) now appeared premature. The enemy had played into his hands by committing Stephan Battle Group in much the same haste and ignorance of the opposition as Scott-Cockburn's brigade had attacked El Gubi; but 7 Armoured Division had not been ready to receive this sacrificial offering. The rest of that division was committed elsewhere and Gatehouse might now have to stand alone, not only against Stephan but against both panzer divisions.

Cunningham was naturally worried and his BGS, Brigadier Galloway, warned Norrie by R/T and prompted him to order Scott-Cockburn to the aid of Gatehouse, a move which took all afternoon and turned the whole Corps situation upside-down. Other suggestions from Godwin-Austen and [Freyberg](#) that Gatehouse should avail himself of the support of the New Zealand Division, with its battalion of Valentines and its strong artillery then only a few miles to the south-east, were not accepted either by Gatehouse or his superiors, though 13 Corps did agree to release 4 Armoured Brigade from its protective role, recognising the inevitable. The three regiments of 4 Armoured Brigade meanwhile faced north confidently, apparently unaware of the anxieties felt on their behalf.

The danger was fortunately not as great as it appeared. A shortage of ammunition of which 21 Panzer had complained early in the morning developed by the afternoon into a complete breakdown of administrative services, leaving the whole division temporarily stranded a few miles west of [Capuzzo](#). Cruewell now wanted both divisions to drive against Gatehouse's brigade; but 21 Panzer could not move. So 15 Panzer attacked alone in the late afternoon, into the setting sun and too late to achieve a decision against the 100-odd tanks of 4 Armoured Brigade. Even this division was short of petrol and it was confused by the deceptive mass of British transport, which obscured the centres of resistance and thinned out German artillery fire as targets seemed to expand alarmingly. The three British armoured regiments were nevertheless gradually pushed back south-eastwards across the Trigh el-Abd in furious fighting, and when the leading elements of 22 Armoured Brigade arrived from the west at dusk they were more than welcome, though too

late to do much this day.

This time the enemy camped for the night on the battlefield and damaged Stuarts not towed away were irretrievably lost, whereas 15 Panzer by its own accounts had lost no tanks at all. Since 4 Armoured Brigade had this day lost more than forty tanks from all causes this outcome was highly ominous, though the bad omens were hidden in greatly inflated claims of German tank losses, which had so far been no more than a dozen all told. Gatehouse now had only 97 of the 164 tanks with which he had entered [Libya](#).

vi

The switching of 22 Armoured Brigade from El Gubi put paid to rather vague plans of installing a South African brigade as a new tenant there in place of Ariete and of sending the 22nd to join [7 Armoured Brigade](#) and the Support Group at [Sidi Rezegh](#). The South Africans had done little so far other than attract the main attentions of the enemy air forces, an unsought and unwelcome distinction, and were only too willing to co-operate with Scott-Cockburn in dislodging the Italians. But this scheme was watered down even before the 22nd departed to the nebulous task of 'masking' El Gubi if the Italians offered determined opposition. At all events one brigade, the 1st, dug in in an arc east and south of El Gubi and, after much delay, 5 South African Brigade began to move to [Sidi Rezegh](#), reaching two miles north of the Trigh el-Abd before darkness (and lack of training in night marches) halted it.

The need of more infantry at [Sidi Rezegh](#) had been felt acutely since dawn on the 20th. With no more than a company at hand, [7 Armoured Brigade](#) could not seize and hold the raised rim of the escarpment just to the north and gain observation across to Ed Duda. It could not even dislodge the anti-tank guns brought up in the west during the night, nor the infantry of [Africa](#) and Bologna Divisions which had dug in facing what Panzer Group still regarded as a minor intrusion. The tank units and guns with a handful of infantry were thus condemned to hold a three-mile-wide ledge of flat desert sprinkled with scrub, which gave cover to infantry and low anti-tank guns but none to tanks or lorries. The enemy overlooked this ledge from the north and south-west and shelled it all day from guns hidden below the Rezegh escarpment, and when the Support Group arrived in mid-morning to relieve the tank

units it came under accurate and persistent fire. Its five infantry companies could not attack six or seven enemy battalions, though with the backing of the 160-odd tanks of [7 Armoured Brigade](#) they could expect to hold their ground. Four companies were stretched thinly across three and a half miles of the northern front and the fifth covered the right rear to the south-east, with two field batteries in between and the squadrons of [4 SA Armoured Car Regiment](#) roaming widely in support. Stukas bombed the area in the afternoon but caused no casualties and did little damage.

It needed a sanguine disposition to see this as a promising situation, now [22 Armoured](#) was diverted to the east and the South Africans had the curious role for infantry of containing an armoured division. [General Freyberg's](#) prediction that more infantry would be needed to relieve [Tobruk](#) was already coming true. But Gott was as optimistic as ever and told Norrie as early as 10 a.m. that the Support Group would be able to link up with the [Tobruk](#) garrison if the sortie started next morning. The sortie was therefore ordered and Gott was given the task of 'co-ordinating all troops in the [SIDI REZEGH](#) area'. ¹

Gott was at this time unaware that the enemy retained the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, and it came as a surprise to him when he paid another visit at night (20th–21st) and learned that Brigadier Campbell, commanding the Support Group, had 'no real foothold' ² on this vital feature and that the enemy's use of the Trigh Capuzzo and the By-pass road was unimpaired. An improvement could nevertheless be expected in the morning, when [5 South African Brigade](#) was due to arrive, and Campbell therefore agreed to attack

¹ Norrie, 'Narrative of Events'.

² Cabinet Office official narrative, 'General Auchinleck's Offensive and the Relief of [Tobruk](#)', Ch. G, Phase 2 (hereinafter the [UK](#) narrative).

northwards at first light on the 21st with the four companies of infantry facing the rim of the escarpment supported by his 25-pounders. With the escarpment in his hands, a link-up between [7 Armoured Brigade](#) and the [Tobruk](#) garrison at Ed Duda should be a simple matter, or so it seemed.

This was a haphazard way of mounting an operation of immense significance for the whole campaign. In the planning stages it had been realised that a premature sortie could expose the [Tobruk](#) garrison to grave danger; yet this risk was taken before both panzer divisions had been engaged and at a time when neither of them was in any way tied to operations elsewhere. Shortly after the sortie was ordered, indeed, Gatehouse's situation was viewed with considerable alarm and his brigade ended the day in hasty retreat from obviously superior forces. To cover operations at [Sidi Rezegh](#) both 4 and 22 Armoured Brigades were to be ready to attack northwards on the 21st, and if the enemy withdrew he was to be 'relentlessly pursued'¹—an eventuality which might have commended itself to Gatehouse and Scott-Cockburn but which would have appeared in a very different light to those in the path of two onrushing panzer divisions.

By an ironic turn of events the enemy was planning such a move, though not as a retreat. After breaking contact at Gabr Saleh, 15 Panzer was to swing right, 21 Panzer was to come up on its right, and the two were to advance north-westwards at 6.30 a.m. on the 21st through [Sidi Rezegh](#) to [Belhamed](#), to end in one swift stroke all chance of a junction between the invaders and the garrison of [Tobruk](#). Anti-tank and field gunners with sapper-infantry would cover the rear and hold off the British forces now south of Gabr Saleh. Rommel's confidence that small rearguards could achieve this was not in the event misplaced; but the scheme was risky and it is worth nothing that if these rearguards failed the whole of [Africa Corps](#) could be sandwiched in the midst of 7 Armoured Division, with South Africans and part of the [Tobruk](#) garrison piling in to complete its destruction, a situation more favorable to Eighth Army than the crusader planners had dared hope for.

There was no prima facie case for preferring this move to the more obvious one of driving home the advantage which 15 Panzer had gained the previous evening by a combined attack southwards from Gabr Saleh, and Cruewell, whose idea it was to link the two divisions in an attack, had expressed no preference as to the direction or objective and asked Panzer Group to specify these. The decisive influence seems to have been Rommel's grudging acceptance of
crusader

as a major offensive and its corollary that the British

intended nothing less than the final relief of [Tobruk](#). Rommel guessed further that the garrison would try to break out south-eastwards next day, and Suemmermann issued orders accordingly that strongpoints facing [Tobruk](#) must be held at all costs. The sudden departure of [Africa Corps](#) from the frontier areas, however, would leave the strongpoints there to their own resources, and Rommel therefore signalled urgently to General Schmitt to defend his positions against attacks from any direction, including the rear, and submit situation reports every three hours until further notice, and de Giorgis likewise. Rommel's defensive scheme which had seemed admirable during the long lull now displayed its weakness. He could take his armour back towards [Tobruk](#), but only by turning his back on Schmitt and de Giorgis, and his nagging worries on their behalf were to become a distraction which in the end fatally undermined his judgment.

vii

Dawn on the 21st brought with it high hopes that crusader would gather speed and weight and quickly achieve victory. The Tobruk garrison would direct its strong tank force and artillery and two brigades of infantry against the Italians in the east and south-east and burst through to Ed Duda, while [7 Armoured Brigade](#) would pass through the Support Group at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and make contact with the garrison, the South Africans meanwhile consolidating the [Sidi Rezegh](#) end of the 'corridor' and 4 and 22 Armoured Brigades taking care of the German armour. Three hours sufficed to being these hopes crashing down.

The Tobruk sortie had been planned as a second-phase operation, after the battle of the armour. No threat of tank attack was envisaged as the break-out forces broke through to Ed Duda and linked up with 30 Corps, and from there they would begin at once to 'roll up' the remaining siege troops, in conjunction with the infantry of 30 Corps. But this was not what Norrie had had in mind when he proposed making straight for [El Adem](#). He wanted the sortie on the second day (the 19th) with the enemy armour still undefeated. Cunningham did not perceive this distinction and though he rejected the 'go for Torbruk' suggestion he still hoped to start the sortie

on that day. Even Major-General Scobie, who was present at the conference of 15 October, was not asked to face enemy armour and he had only one plan. This was to establish his army tank brigade (of mixed infantry, cruiser and light tanks) and an infantry battalion on Ed Duda with a field regiment close at hand. With British forces at [Sidi Rezegh](#) this would close the Trigh Capuzzo and By-pass road to enemy traffic. A heavier sortie was possible: Scobie had four strong infantry brigades, each with anti-tank companies and MMGs, and could give them strong artillery support. But the question had not been put. What he planned was what had been asked of him.

The night of 20–21 November was filled with stealthy movement as four bridges were put across the anti-tank ditch in the south-eastern sector of the [Tobruk](#) perimeter and the tanks and infantry assembled for the sortie, while in the west and south the Polish Carpathian Brigade and the 23rd Infantry launched feints with thunderous artillery support and apparent success. A brief bombing by the [RAF](#) after dawn was quickly followed at 6.30 a.m. by the assault on the foremost strongpoints, with the help of timed concentrations of artillery fire. The 2nd King's Own on the left with the 19 Matildas of D Squadron, 7 Royal Tanks, gained an easy success and 120 'completely surprised' ¹ German prisoners—the first hint that the opposition was not what had been supposed. The next hint was that all the unit carriers and many tanks fell victim to unsuspected minefields. One company had strayed to the right, but was not needed, and the strongpoint (nicknamed 'Butch') was soon strongly held against possible counter-attack.

The ease of this success on the left, however, was like a blue patch of sky in a thunderstorm. The 2nd Black Watch on the right suffered fearful losses and the survivors had to draw on the deepest resources of the human spirit to sustain themselves and the traditions of their regiment in its hardest struggle since Loos, 1915. ² The Black Watch were without the 50 Matildas of 4 Royal Tanks at first, as these had unwittingly veered off to the left, and the infantry came under deadly fire in front of the first objective, 'Jill'. As the Matildas, correcting their error, drove down from the north trailed by the detached company of 2 King's Own, B and D Companies staged a desperate and costly frontal assault. By these combined efforts Jill was taken and the King's Own company occupied it while the Black Watch pressed on towards their final objective, 'Tiger'. But more unlocated minefields intervened, anti-tank guns spoke up here and there, and the remaining I tanks broke up into small

detachments probing as best they could for away through. The defenders of Tiger lived up to the British nickname for their position and offered ferocious resistance, to which was added heavy fire from neighbouring strongpoints. As detachments of I tanks slowly closed in from three sides, the bagpipes (hitherto silent for security reasons) sounded above the noise of battle. One piper, wounded, continued to play where he fell. Then at 9 a.m. the battalion, now numbering fewer than 200, rose in the wake of

¹ Quoted in the [UK](#) narrative.

² Fergusson, *The Black Watch and the King's Enemies*, p. 111.

B Squadron and took Tiger at the point of the bayonet. One stubborn party of machine-gunners held out in the south-west until the tanks ran over it. Five officers and 160 other ranks of the Black Watch remained in action, less than a quarter of those who had set out three hours before. Their booty included 12 field and 30 machine guns (soon turned against the enemy), together with the chastened survivors of Tiger's garrison. These Germans and Italians had no cause for shame. The superlative élan of the Black Watch in the attack had been equalled by the remarkable persistence of the defence in the face of formidable tank-and-infantry pressure. Later in the morning D Company of 1 Bedfords and Herts came up to reinforce the Black Watch, whose numbers increased by evening to eight officers and 196 other ranks. ¹

The carriers of 2 Queen's had been repulsed at Tugun at 7 a.m. and tried again at ten with no better result. A heavier attack was needed but took some time to prepare. Meanwhile the Black Watch had suffered fire from 'Jack' a little to the north-east and 'a weak coy', with two troops of 4 Royal Tanks and supported by 104 Royal Horse Artillery, quickly seized this position at about 10.30 a.m. This was a more significant move than at first appeared. Not only did it forestall a much larger operation intended for the same purpose, but 'Jack' proved to be the headquarters of Meythaler Battalion and the kingpin of the defence on the left. Major Meythaler had signalled his divisional headquarters at 10.25 a.m. that all was quiet; '9 British tanks out of action on mines', he added, and '10 tanks still waiting ready to attack us'.

Then there was silence. Meythaler himself was captured and General Suemmermann was left to guess what had happened.

This gave a lodgment in enemy territory three and a half miles deep and ten square miles in area. An outer ring of enemy strongpoints was more loosely connected and could be more easily penetrated and there was, moreover, a considerable amount of artillery, mostly Italian, which now lay open to attack in the intervening spaces. The 28 assorted cruiser tanks and 21 light tanks of 1 Royal Tanks had been meant to sweep unaided through this area, overrunning various headquarters and creating confusion; but this naturally took no account of the many undetected minefields which interlaced the front and of the anti-tank guns which lay in ambush, to which the thickening haze of dust and smoke added another obstacle. Thus 1 Royal Tanks lost four tanks to mines at the start and was held up by guns at 'Wolf', south-east of Tiger, until the I tanks of 4 Royal Tanks could engage them. With this

¹ In terms of killed, some 200, the Black Watch lost about twice as many here as any NZ battalion in a single action throughout the war.

aid C Squadron swept through the northern part of Wolf and after some delay A and C Squadrons attacked 'Freddie', east of Tiger, only to be turned back by anti-tank fire. Passing through Jack after its capture, 1 Royal Tanks took another forty prisoners. The regiment's final objective was 'Walter', just south of the [Via Balbia](#) four miles outside the [Tobruk](#) perimeter; but there was now little hope of reaching this and 1 Royal Tanks therefore rallied north-west of Butch, leaving a light troop to defend a battery of 1 RHA which had moved forward to Jill. The more elaborate attack on Tugun went in at 3 p.m. and gained perhaps half the position, together with 250 Italians and many light field guns; but the Italians in the western half could not be dislodged and the base of the break-out area remained on this account uncomfortably narrow.

If the raids of 1 Royal Tanks had achieved less than intended and the rear areas had proved less vulnerable than the planners imagined, they had nevertheless caused much alarm in the enemy camp and brought Rommel himself to the scene. He was desperately anxious to prevent a link-up between the garrison and the

British at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and came up at the head of 3 Reconnaissance Unit and a scratch force of guns of various kinds, including Suemmermann's last company of anti-tank guns. Much of the opposition 32 Army Tank Brigade (which was now in command of the sortie) attributed to existing strongpoints undoubtedly came from this mobile force and a German author speaks of 'bitter, costly fighting' here.¹ Yet it was not this force which chiefly hindered the feared link-up, nor even the strong Italian opposition at Tugun. The decisive influence was the adverse trend to events at [Sidi Rezegh](#). The final thrust, to Ed Duda, was postponed from 2.20 to 4 p.m. because of Tugun; then within five minutes of zero hour word came from 30 Corps that the South Africans could not get through and Ed Duda operations was forthwith put off indefinitely.

The chief concern now was to make fast the valuable gains until the advance to Ed Duda could be resumed. Prisoners taken so far numbered 1100, half of them German, and any alarm which Scobie might feel at the addition of 10–12 miles to the length of the perimeter he now had to defend with 59 fewer tanks was surpassed by Suemmermann's dismay at the sudden reversal of his situation. The war diary of Africa Division described the outlook as 'very serious' and added that the next day 'would probably bring a crisis.'

¹ Kriebel, *Feldzug in Nordafrika*, an unpublished narrative compiled at the end of the war in conjunction with German officers who took part—a valuable adjunct to the contemporary German documents. Kriebel was GSO I of 15 Pz Div in crusader.

viii

Suemmermann's view was more comprehensive than Scobie's, as he was committed at [Sidi Rezegh](#) as well as [Tobruk](#), and for him the day had provided a bewildering succession of fluctuations of fortune on both fronts, ending with as much uncertainty as it had started. At [Sidi Rezegh](#) 155 Infantry Regiment, on the escarpment north of the airfield and the lower ground to the west, was in the path of the British advance to link up with [Tobruk](#) and was told to hold its ground at all costs, as was 361 African Regiment on Point 175, just to the east. The latter, though ill-equipped, had the better position, being covered to some extent by a deep wadi—

Rugbet en-Nbeidat ¹—curling round from south to west and another to the east. These formations and Italians (probably of Pavia Division) who were working their way eastwards along the southernmost escarpment from Bir Bu Creimisa greatly outnumbered in infantry the British at [Sidi Rezegh](#); but they viewed the 100-odd tanks of [7 Armoured Brigade](#) with understandable concern.

From the British viewpoint everything depended on these tanks and on the early arrival of 5 South African Brigade. Meanwhile three companies of 1 King's Royal Rifle Corps—the '60th Rifles'—and A Company of 2 Rifle Brigade prepared to attack northwards. Planners calculated and consulted throughout the night to get this small force across the billiard-table surface of the airfield, an oblong cleared of the low scrub which dotted the surrounding desert and mercilessly exposed to enemy fire. Then the infantry was to seize the escarpment to the north and gain observation over the Trigh Capuzzo as a first step towards linking up with the [Tobruk](#) garrison. A Company of 2 Rifle Brigade was to occupy the barely discernible Point 167 on the north-western edge of the landing ground and the 300 men of the 60th Rifles would take over the rest of the escarpment as far as the Rugbet en-Nbeidat, a stretch of two and a half miles. Night patrols found no enemy on the objectives but 'small numbers' ² were nevertheless expected to be there. These should be dealt with adequately by a concentration of all fifty available 25-pounders, and 6 Royal Tanks was to cover the left flank and move down to the Trigh Capuzzo, sending a detachment on to Ed Duda when the time was ripe. The right flank would be open but [7 Hussars](#) could quickly move up to cover it, while 2 Royal Tanks guarded the rear.

The attack was due to start at 8.30. a.m. and an hour before this the enemy shelled the whole length of the starting line as if to

¹ 'Rugbet' = wadi; 'en-Nbeidat' = the Abeidat, the chief bedouin tribe of the region.

² Wake and Deedes (editors), Swift and Bold, *The Story of the King's Royal Rifle Corps in the Second World War 1939–1945*, p. 64.

indicate it to the waiting riflemen. Then at 7.45 the South African armoured cars

patrolling to the south-east reported a vast mass of enemy armour, perhaps 200 tanks with supporting arms, advancing rapidly. There was no time for elaborate counter-measures and Brigadier Davy had to act quickly. He could not call off the attack, as 70 Division had long since started its sortie and expected help at Ed Duda. The best he could do was to hand over the attacking force to Brigadier Campbell of the Support Group, detach [7 Hussars](#) and F Battery 4 RHA, and with these and 2 Royal Tanks, 100 tanks in all, turn to meet the newcomers. Two miles to the south-east he got ready to fight what was in fact the bulk of [Africa Corps](#).

The attack on [Sidi Rezegh](#) went in under a short concentration by the 42 remaining guns and covered by a thin smoke screen. The Bren carriers made the best of this, racing up towards the escarpment in the wake of the bursting shells. Five of the seven carriers of D Company on the right were disabled by flanking fire, but A Company's carriers missed this and reached the edge of the escarpment only to find the enemy strongly posted in the numerous wadis. The platoon commander made for a large wadi and there the crews dismounted and carried on a series of skirmishes which brought in thirty prisoners, mostly Italian, and ended the struggle on the right. Carriers of C Company on the left came under heavy fire from the west, but met no enemy on the escarpment and stayed to guard this flank until the infantry got forward. The only remaining opposition on the objective was now in the centre, facing A Company.

The infantry, meanwhile, followed in widely extended order. A filmy veil of dust and smoke lingering from the shellfire gave welcome cover as the men trudged across the airfield and little fire came their way. All companies, however, 'came under very severe fire from all arms and were forced to get down' when they emerged from this veil 200 yards short of the escarpment. ¹ D Company managed by fire and movement to get up to the wadi containing A Company's carriers with small loss, C Company reached the crest on the left with 'fairly heavy casualties' ², and A Company, 2 Rifle Brigade, reached Point 167 with comparative ease despite MG fire from the left which 6 Royal Tanks failed to subdue. In front of A Company of 60th Rifles, however, resistance was fierce and it was only by heroic individual actions and pressure from the flanks that ground could be gained. Rifleman Beeley, for example, ran forward firing his Bren from his hip and killed all seven men in

¹ Swift and Bold, p. 65.

² Ibid., p. 66.

one post, silencing an anti-tank gun and two MGs, but losing his own life in so doing. (His bravery and inspiring example were recognised by a posthumous VC.) The acting adjutant at great personal risk went across to the artillery FOO and directed his attention to the most troublesome source of fire, which was then silenced. The survivors of A Company rushed in 'with fixed swords' and all opposition ended.

The 60th Rifles lost 3 officers and 26 other ranks killed and 55 wounded in this very fine action; enemy dead might have been as many as 300 and some 700 German and Italian prisoners were collected. 'There were large numbers of all kinds of machine guns, mortars, anti-tank rifles and quick-firing ¹ anti-tank guns in the positions, together with quantities of all types of ammunition.... The positions were carefully and cleverly sited and well built up with stones' ² and it seemed that at least one German MG company had been in occupation. By noon the whole escarpment was held, enemy shelling had stopped, and men could move freely about their tasks amid the gruesome relics of the fighting. The Commanding Officer of the 60th Rifles, Lieutenant-Colonel De Salis, decided to close in to the west on Point 162, dominating the track down the escarpment past the tomb of [Sidi Rezegh](#). There the depleted companies adapted enemy defences to their own needs in the rocky ground and artillery OPs began to direct fire on the By-pass road to the north-west.

Unfortunately 6 Royal Tanks had not waited for this propitious time to start the drive to Ed Duda. The regiment knocked out five German tanks on the way to the Trigh Capuzzo; but a 'special detachment' (including Regimental Headquarters) despatched unsupported towards Ed Duda drove through a German engineer company on [Belhamed](#), causing temporary confusion but losing two tanks, and then struck more trouble, probably from the scratch force under Rommel himself. None of this detachment returned. This needless loss of the bulk of the regiment left only enough tanks to form a composite squadron and this was soon urgently summoned

to help Davy.

Brigadier Davy had undertaken an almost hopeless task and had the German advance been pressed resolutely he would soon have been overrun. The 7th Hussars soon lost its CO and the bulk of its tanks, and the remaining dozen, apart from a detached troop, became separated from Brigade Headquarters and had to drive far to the east to find a way round the huge enemy force. This it did, after many tribulations, but too late to take further part in

¹ Probably 'automatic' is meant.

² Swift and Bold, p. 66.

the day's fighting. With only 2 Royal Tanks and the guns left (all the latter now having turned to face the German armour) Davy did what he could to shield the Support Group. The enemy luckily showed some uncertainty at this stage and drew off north-eastwards, covered by anti-tank guns. South of Point 175 the German tanks refuelled, and when they came on again in mid-afternoon the 25-pounders of the Support Group gave them a fiery reception. Most of the remaining strength of 2 Royal Tanks was quickly expended in a flank attack and at this critical juncture Brigadier Campbell arrived on the scene with the composite squadron of 6 Royal Tanks. With the strength of desperation the enemy was brought to a halt, and the day ended with [Sidi Rezegh](#) still precariously in British hands and the enemy in overwhelming force just to the east.

Why [7 Armoured Brigade](#) and the Support Group had to face the whole of the German armour this day without help from the rest of their division is an unhappy story. Over-estimates of enemy tank losses made 4 and 22 Armoured Brigades only too ready to see the sudden disengagement of [Africa Corps](#) at [Bir Gibni](#) as a retreat, and Cunningham at Advanced Army Headquarters heard accordingly from Norrie at 8.45 a.m. that the German armour had 'taken a knock' ¹ and the action had now developed into a running fight. Scott-Cockburn was told to intercept the enemy and Gatehouse to attack his rear; but neither could match the pace of the German force, though they managed to disable some lorries. Both had to halt for refuelling, 4

Armoured Brigade after only a few miles, and armoured cars were left to carry on the pursuit. When the brigades got under way again, the 4th on the right was held up by rain-softened desert and later by a few 88-millimetre guns eight miles from the scene of the last-ditch stand by Davy and Campbell, while the 22nd veered too far south and passed some miles beyond the battlefield before Gott could recall it. Scott-Cockburn's Crusaders at last came to grips with tanks at Bir el Haiad in the evening, a dozen miles south of the Support Group, but only a minor skirmish ensued before the contestants retired for the night. Neither brigade suffered more than a few scratches from the day's fighting, whereas [7 Armoured Brigade](#) was virtually destroyed: it had 28 tanks left out of 160-odd and the Support Group was in a serious predicament. The 5th South African Brigade, far from joining the Support Group as intended, had been halted by Gott personally south-east of Bir el Haiad and told to dig in there until the route north was open. There the South Africans beat off an attack by Italian tanks from the west and knocked out eight tanks and at 2.30 p.m. repulsed

¹ Quoted in the [UK](#) narrative.

a German tank thrust from the north-east while Gott waited for the situation to clarify. He was out of touch with his other brigades and for most of the day could do little or nothing or influence the course of events.

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Norrie's hopeful interpretation of the situation early in the morning, however, had set in motion a train of events which, though intended to be subsidiary to the armoured battle, proved in the end decisive: he recommended starting the operations of 13 Corps. Cunningham had not expected this and took some time to consider it. He spoke to Norrie first, pointing out that though it 'would probably have no immediate effect on the tank battle, the general effect might well be important'¹—true enough, but a radical departure from the crusader plan, nevertheless, and all the more so since 4 Armoured Brigade was released from its protective role. Then Cunningham asked Godwin-Austen's opinion and finally Auchinleck's. All agreed and [General Freyberg](#) was therefore told to make for the Trigh Capuzzo at [Sidi Azeiz](#)

(confirmed in writing at 9.45 a.m.), and General Messervy was authorised to carry out his tasks in the frontier area.

None of these officers had any idea of the real trend of events. One report [Freyberg](#) heard this morning, for example, was that 65 enemy AFVs ² were 'confirmed destroyed yesterday', and when 4 Armoured Brigade drove across the battlefield on the 21st it supplied no corrected estimate of enemy tank losses. By noon the whole of 30 Corps had broken up into brigade groups with independent aims and uncertain communications and no accurate picture of operations could emerge.

Everything put in Gott's hands except the South African brigade had slipped through them. Norrie could learn more from Scobie than from Gott and it was about the [Tobruk](#) sortie that Cunningham began to worry. Perhaps with [Freyberg's](#) warning in his ears, he pressed for greater effort to get the South Africans forward—both brigades if at all possible. [Brigadier Napier](#), Norrie's BGS, assured Galloway, and through him Cunningham, that the battle was under control and he hoped to get both of Brink's brigades up next day to co-operate with 70 Division. To Cunningham, watching flags on the map, there was no obvious reason for the hold-up. A liaison officer arrived from 30 Corps in the late afternoon with more or less reassuring news of the battle; but the must have left before Norrie halted the sortie short of its final stage, the dash to Ed Duda. Not knowing this, Cunningham anxiously visualised Scobie's spear-

¹ UK narrative.

² Armoured fighting vehicles, normally tanks, though armoured cars would be counted.

head reaching that feature and there being stranded. He had no word of the débâcle in the morning, when a large part of 6 Royal Tanks disappeared below the escarpment at [Sidi Rezegh](#) never to return, and he had no inkling of the plight of the Support Group. His while conception of the battle was artificial and he told the LO to tell Norrie that 30 Corps must link up with the sortie if it reached Ed Duda: 'this would appear to involve only a short night march', he added. ¹ To Campbell's

embattled troops at [Sidi Rezegh](#) these words might have sounded like a message from outer space. Cunningham's last injunction to the LO is revealing: if 'Tobruch were not cleared up' he would 'certainly required to see the Corps Commander tomorrow' ². A firm order would have been more to the point.

Cunningham's instructions to Godwin-Austen were even less distinct. Godwin-Austen could 'go forward as he pleased, and need not refer unnecessarily to the Army Commander' ³ though he was not to take 'undue risk'. These orders did, however, contain one meaty item: the New Zealand brigade group designated to cooperate if need be with 30 Corps—the 6th, now at Bir el-Hariga—would be despatched westwards and firm orders on this point would follow. This was the only way that the crusader plan now allowed him to influence the [Tobruk](#) battle and Cunningham eagerly seized it. If the South Africans could not get through to Ed Duda perhaps the New Zealanders could. The LO from 30 Corps had been told of this and of Cunningham's feeling that the fighting outside [Tobruk](#) would call for more and more infantry, and it must have come as a surprise when Norrie rejected the scheme. Norrie took it that the New Zealanders would come through Gabr Saleh, a route closed to infantry, whereas Cunningham meant them to drive above the escarpment south of the Trigh Capuzzo. When Norrie heard this he agreed; he was not particularly anxious for more infantry but welcomed the Valentine tanks which he wrongly understood to be with the brigade.

The Army order to 13 Corps about the New Zealand brigade stated that it was to move 'with all possible speed' ⁴ but this phrase was not passed on to the New Zealand Division and no sense of urgency was felt at either Corps or Divisional Headquarters. So far as Godwin-Austen and [Freyberg](#) knew, the battle was going favourably and a Corps situation report at 8.10 p.m. quoted an estimate that 170 enemy tanks had been hit, many vehicles and guns disabled or captured, and the Italians were rapidly withdrawing 'true to form'.

¹ Quoted in the [UK](#) narrative.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ UK narrative.

In reality Eighth Army had lost 180-odd tanks this day against a loss of fewer than twenty enemy tanks (including eight Italian tanks claimed by South African guns). Had Cunningham and his corps commanders realised that by this time .30 Corps was not outnumbered in tanks by its opponents—it barely reached parity with the Germans alone—they would have been thunderstruck. So long as 1 and 32 Army Tank Brigades remained in different compartments of the battle from that of 7 Armoured Division, Gott's major purpose of seeking out and destroying the enemy armour was now beyond his strength.

It was a stroke of luck that neither Rommel nor Cruewell saw the battle in the light. The former was still desperately anxious to maintain the siege of [Tobruk](#) and had in mind a defensive action to economise in resources and gradually adjust the balance with an enemy he thought greatly superior in strength. For the same reason Cruewell proposed a very different course of action. He was intent on a battle of manoeuvre in which he felt that the superior skill and battle-worthiness of his panzer troops offered the only hope of success; supplies at hand could not sustain a long-drawn-out battle. As a compromise between Rommel's and Cruewell's viewpoints [Africa Corps](#) was split up, 21 Panzer going to [Belhamed](#) in a blocking role with 155 Infantry Regiment on its right and 361 Africa Regiment on its left, while 15 Panzer drove back along the Trigh Capuzzo and assembled south of Gasr el Arid. Cruewell meant to tackle the flank and rear of a force which he thought stretched in one vast mass of tanks, guns and vehicles from [Sidi Rezegh](#) to Bir el-Haleizin. By so doing he took his strongest formation right off the battlefield before dawn on 22 November, and it was not until after dark that it returned to the ground it willingly gave up in the morning. While 15 Panzer was thus touring its own backyard the British armour was free to concentrate against the Germans and Italians south-east of [Tobruk](#).

Now was the time to smash through the weaker of the two panzer divisions, the 21st, and the battered 155 Infantry Regiment and join hands with the [Tobruk](#) garrison. For the first time 7 Armoured Division could apply its full strength at one

point and had every advantage of ground and observation. The situation around the newly-formed salient in the [Tobruk](#) perimeter was also favorable, the enemy there was still uncertain and confused, and from Scobie's viewpoint there was everything to be said for pushing on to Ed Duda before opposition hardened, though not unless 30 Corps meant to meet to him there.

As General Norrie learned the details of the previous day's fighting and formed a better appreciation of the situation, however, he gave up the idea of pushing through to Ed Duda on the 22nd and postponed the last stage of the [Tobruk](#) sortie because of 'the unfavorable situation at [Sidi Rezegh](#)'. ¹ He was still at Gott's headquarters somewhere west of Gabr Saleh and had to rely on what came over the 'blower', on delayed reports by LOs, and on various signals, the sum total of which made a patchy picture. The one fact which towered ominously above everything was that 7 Armoured Division now had only 204 tanks in working order. Despite gross over-estimates of enemy tank losses, which remained uncorrected, this was enough to induce caution until the situation cleared. Norrie's attitude was reasonable, though he was ignoring Cunningham's wishes in not forcing the issue at Ed Duda; but a heavier penalty than the Army Commander's displeasure was to be exacted. He was shortly to be faced with the utter ruination of the armoured plan.

x

The morning's operations on the 22nd were deceptive. Skirmishes took place at various points from [Sidi Rezegh](#) to Bir el Haiad, ten miles to the south, and it was not at all clear from the behaviour of some enemy units that they were trying to get away. Gunners of a battery of 60 Field Regiment, indeed, gained the opposite impression. They were rushed up to the eastern flank to meet an attack by forty tanks and blazed away at them over open sights in a heroic duel, 'gunners dropping dead and wounded about their guns' and other braving furious fire to bring up more ammunition. A fight to the death seemed under way when the enemy suddenly broke off and disappeared. The CO of the 60th Field ² claims credit for this one behalf of his gunners and they certainly deserved praise, but the enemy was in fact doing what he intended. Some tanks descended the Rugbet en-Nbeidat to the Trigh Capuzzo, but more got down the escarpment farther east. While 21 Panzer disposed itself at [Belhamed](#) during the morning, 15 Panzer slowly retracted its sprawling limbs

and made off in the opposite direction, assembling 20 miles from [Belhamed](#) in the course of the afternoon. The 22nd Armoured Brigade followed only a short distance and came to rest on the southernmost escarpment east of Point 178, while 4 Armoured Brigade went off on a wild-goose chase after an enemy force said to be ten miles south. No such force was found and the brigade slowly retraced its steps over swampy ground back to its starting

¹ UK narrative.

² Lt-Col A. F. Hely (later Brigadier), whose grim account in *The Royal Artillery Commemoration Book, 1939–1945*, pp. 188–9, is the source of the quotation.

point at Bir el-Haleizin. An effective concentration at [Sidi Rezegh](#) was as far off as ever and the two armoured brigades now showed a marked reluctance to venture on the three-mile-wide ledge between the [Sidi Rezegh](#) and southern escarpments. They voted instead for freedom of manoeuvre on the open plateau and thus threw away the reward earned by the Support Group in gaining dominance over the Trigh Capuzzo. With the main enemy on the lower ground between there and Ed Duda, the British armour could advance under cover of its field guns with splendid observation and every chance of success. But 21 Panzer was allowed to assemble at [Belhamed](#) opposed only by the field guns, and the Germans quickly regained the initiative.

The panzer troops were accustomed to a faster tempo of operations than their opponents and planning in Eighth Army was apt to be outdated by sudden and unexpected German moves. Thus Gott placed a sanguine construction on a lull at 1.30 p.m. and conferred on the landing ground with officers at hand, deciding to bring up 5 South African Brigade to repeat on a larger scale the attack of the previous morning to gain a wider base on the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment next morning for a thrust to Ed Duda. At 2 p.m. he set out for the South African brigade to fill in the details of this scheme; twenty minutes later 21 Panzer attacked.

This was on Rommel's own initiative. With a hazy idea of what Cruewell intended with [15 Panzer Division](#), he came up to Ravenstein's headquarters and

ordered what he thought would be a supporting operation: Knabe Group, the infantry of the division, was to take on the formidable assignment of attacking southwards straight up the escarpment into the teeth of the Support Group while 5 Panzer Regiment with attached '88s' was to swing round the western edge of the same escarpment and attack eastwards up the gentle slope of the three-mile-wide ledge to regain the airfield. As an aid to a major assault from the east by 15 Panzer this was reasonable enough; as a solo effort by Ravenstein's weaker division it would have appeared preposterous and Rommel certainly did not intend it thus. When 21 Panzer succeeded tout seul in regaining the airfield the final doom of British armoured hopes for crusader was sealed.

The victory thus gained had deep foundations. Never did the panzer troops give a plainer demonstration that their battle tactics were in a class far above those of their opponents. Neither side had any shortage of courage or determination and it was the superior combination of all arms which allowed 5 Panzer Regiment to make steady progress in the face of counter-thrusts by the yeomen of 22 Armoured Brigade. Campbell and his dwindling band of gunners and infantry performed their usual prodigies of valour, but weight of numbers and guns and the presence of panzers behind them tore loose the grip of the 60th Rifles and the company of 2 Rifle Brigade from the escarpment above the tomb of [Sidi Rezegh](#), and the men were rounded up in sad clusters in the wadis and re-entrants and herded into captivity. German anti-tank guns on both this and the southern escarpment meanwhile formed a gauntlet which Scott-Cockburn's Crusaders tried to run with little chance of success. Those which got farthest ended up victims to the '88s' with 5 Panzer Regiment.

The 4th Armoured Brigade was slow in arriving and by the time its 108 Stuarts were within striking distance the remnants of the 22nd were making a valiant but unavailing stand on the airfield. All eyes were on the German tanks which appeared from time to time through the haze of dust and smoke, and the 25-pounders engaged them whenever they could over open sights, neglecting the '88s' and 50-millimetre guns which were doing most of the damage. But this was not the occasion for a revision of British armoured tactics and the Stuarts when they came were introduced with care lest they too became burnt offerings to a more skilful enemy.

Gott and Gatehouse conferred briefly south of Point 175 and then 3 and 5 Royal

Tanks edged gingerly westwards south of the airfield until the former linked up with 22 Armoured Brigade. But Brigadier Campbell was impatient. He had been driving about the battlefield all afternoon in an open car, most of his infantry were overrun, and now his gunners were fighting desperately against heavy odds. Campbell therefore led one of the RTR regiments into an attack across the airfield. This was soon repulsed (though it gave 5 Panzer Regiment some anxious moments), Campbell was wounded, his headquarters and some of his guns were overrun, and the remaining guns were in a worse plight than ever. Once again Gott conferred with his brigadiers and decided to withdraw what was left of the Support Group alongside 5 South African Brigade. The enemy continued to advance with all arms co-operating as a well-drilled team and the 25-pounders were threatened with infantry attack with strong artillery support. British tanks then intervened and the crisis passed. As night descended the troops withdrew as planned.

The 22nd Armoured Brigade had suffered heavily and now had only 34 tanks, 7 Armoured Brigade had about 15, and 4 Armoured Brigade still had about 100. These figures tell their own story, and this crushing defeat by an enemy force which had no more than 57 tanks when the action started ¹ cannot be explained in terms of the current complaints that 7 Armoured Division was 'out-numbered and out-ranged'. In the absence of 15 Panzer Division von Ravenstein had been able to defeat the British armour, with help only from the Army Artillery north of Belhamed and despite every disadvantage of ground.

'The final scene', as Lieutenant-Colonel Hely saw it, 'was aweinspiring enough. In the light of burning vehicles and dumps our guns slipped out of action, leaving the field to a relentlessly advancing enemy, who loomed in large, fantastic shapes out of the shadow into the flare of bursting shells.' But nightfall did not end the grim struggle. It was quickly followed by a further German success of the kind that more often comes in battle to the active than to the passive participant. Cruewell had ordered 15 Panzer Division to make 'a wide swing to the south-west' and attack the enemy facing 21 Panzer, and in mid-afternoon this move began. The leading tanks drove rapidly over hard, flat desert and soon came upon a mass of British B Echelons, starting one of the many 'flaps' of the campaign, with supply lorries scattering in all directions before the tanks in ponderous disarray. After several clashes and some readjustment of the marching order the whole division halted

before 7 p.m. still short of the main battlefield. After 40–50 miles it ended up a mile or two south of where it had started and the day had been wasted. The divisional commander, Major-General Neumann-Silkow, ordered 8 Panzer Regiment to close in on the escarpment to the north at Point 175 and the rest of the division settled down for the night.

The commanding officer of the leading tank battalion, Major Fenski, picked his way carefully through the darkness in his armoured command vehicle and suddenly found himself in the midst of a British laager. At ten yards he identified British tanks and with remarkable presence of mind he drove through to the far side, at the same time ordering 1 and 2 Companies to swing left and right respectively to surround the enemy. What followed is described in the divisional war diary:

The tanks shone their headlights, and the commanders jumped out with their machine pistols. The enemy was completely surprised and incapable of action.

So far there had been no firing. A few tanks tried to get away, but were at once set on fire by our tanks, and lit up the battlefield as light as day. While the prisoners were being rounded up a British officer succeeded in setting fire to a tank.

¹ Three were destroyed, twelve damaged, and two broke down, a total loss in 5 Pz Regt of 17 tanks.

This coup on our part got the rest of 4 British Armoured Brigade with light casualties to ourselves. The brigade commander, 17 officers and 150 other ranks were taken prisoner.

One armoured command vehicle, 35 tanks, armoured cars, guns and self-propelled guns, ¹ other fighting vehicles, and some important papers fell into our hands.

The Germans were mistaken about the brigade commander, as Gatehouse was away at the time and escaped capture; but they captured most of brigade headquarters and **8 Hussars**, together with wireless links essential for effective command. Though 3 and 5 Royal Tanks were elsewhere during this affair they, too, were to suffer disorder and dismay when they tried in the blackness of night and in ignorance of

this disaster to link up with brigade headquarters and stumbled instead on the alert [15 Panzer Division](#). For the next day 4 Armoured Brigade was an uncomprehending and uncooperative spectator of the battle, and three days later, after communications were restored and stragglers gathered in, it still numbered only 37 tanks. On the other hand 15 Panzer had suffered its first tank losses this day, a total of 19 tanks, which brought its tank strength down to 116.

The armoured part of the crusader plan had now broken down completely, and with the exception of a solitary action on the 27th the armoured brigades did no more significant fighting, though their presence (reorganized as a composite brigade) as a 'fleet in being' was not without some influence on the campaign. From now onwards the guns and infantry, supported by the two army tank brigades, carried Eighth Army's burden and faced up as best they could to the still-undefeated enemy armour. Rommel and Cruewell had won the first phase and looked for ways and means of sealing their victory.

Meanwhile the South African brigade destined for [Sidi Rezegh](#) fought a sharp action of its own, curiously insulated from the main battle though little more than a stone's throw away. Elements of 155 Infantry Regiment had been filtering along the southern escarpment and by noon reached as far east as Point 178, which overlooked the whole battlefield. Ensnared there among the rocks with anti-tank guns and MGs, they were not easy to dislodge and 11 Armoured Brigade gave them a wide berth. In his anxiety to get 5 South African Brigade to [Sidi Rezegh](#) Gott toyed with the idea of doing the same—of making a wide swing round this position and approaching the airfield from the south-east. But the nuisance value of the enemy here became intolerable and he ordered Brigadier Armstrong to attack Point 178 and occupy the escarpment for some distance to the west.

¹ i.e., 2-pdr anti-tank portées.

Without much ado Armstrong sent in 3 Transvall Scottish at about 1 p.m., supported by only eight 25-pounders. They had to cross a mile of flat desert thinly sprinkled with low camel-thorn and had some 500 yards to go when the enemy opened intense fire and forced the infantry down. Little further progress was made, the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Kirby, was mortally wounded while

urging his men on regardless of fire, and by the time the companies withdrew at dusk the battalion had lost 25 killed, 9 missing and 83 wounded and had made no impression on the enemy position.

The tank battle being in Gott's hands, Norrie particularly concerned himself with the South Africans and conceived of a larger operation which would place the whole of [1 South African Division](#) on the southern escarpment and on a smaller feature to the west, Hagfet en-Nezha.¹ To release 1 South African Brigade from the 'masking' of El Gubi, he was freeing 22 Guards Brigade from its many protective tasks along the L of C and around the [Maddalena](#) landing grounds; but Brigadier Pienaar was to move at once, leaving only a small covering force and pressing northwards before dark. This was the gist of an order General Brink received at 2.40 p.m. But Norrie was to thwarted from above and from below.

Pienaar raised strenuous objections to a night march and when Brink supported him Norrie did not press the point, with the result that Pienaar's brigade was allowed to halt at midnight ten miles east of El Gubi and 12–15 miles south of 5 Brigade, though there was no good reason why the two brigades could not have linked up this night as Norrie wanted. The Corps Commander was now banking on forming a solid infantry position in the [Sidi Rezegh](#) area made up [1 South African Division](#) plus 6 New Zealand Brigade (with a squadron of Valentines), with flank protection by what was left of 7 Armoured Division—a radical change of policy.

Some such arrangement was essential if 30 Corps was to join hands with the [Tobruk](#) garrison in the near future, which was what Norrie had been told he must do. But Cunningham's own resolution weakened regarding El Gubi and he began to fear that 22 Guards Brigade might not suffice for the 'masking' role. He therefore pressed Norrie to detach part of the South African division to reinforce it. With every evidence of embarrassment Norrie did so and a reinforced battalion group was accordingly detached from 1 South African Brigade for the next twenty-four hours, a precaution that was in vain and served only to illustrate how little the Army Commander understood the capabilities of

¹ Hagfet = cistern, but the feature was the head of a wadi.

infantry formations against armoured forces in the open desert. Ariete was free to move in or out of El Gubi as it pleased and the 'masking' troops were left in the end guarding the front door of an empty building.

A junction with the [Tobruk](#) garrison was farther off than ever when the day ended, leaving Scobie poised uncomfortably halfway to Ed Duda with a greatly enlarged perimeter to defend and the spectre of ammunition shortage for his 25-pounders beginning to haunt him. During the day he enlarged the middle of the bulge by taking in 'Lion', a position south-west of Tiger which proved to be undefended, but another attack on the enemy half of Tugun failed. There was much evidence of confusion in the enemy camp, however, suggesting that 32 Army Tank Brigade had it tried could certainly have got to Ed Duda. In so doing it would have constricted if it did not altogether thwart the manoeuvres of [21 Panzer Division](#) in the afternoon.

xi

In four days Eighth Army had lost some 530 tanks ¹ while the enemy lost about 100. ² Of 500 cruisers 7 Armoured Division retained fewer than 90, whereas the three enemy armoured divisions still had 250 tanks (170 of them German) of the 356 with which they had started the battle. Against Ariete the score was even; against the panzer divisions the British tank units were outclassed in a way that defies explanation in terms of personalities or of relative armour and armament, the terms chiefly considered in the [Middle East](#) at the time.

The German 50-millimetre and '88' were indeed much better as anti-tank guns than their British counterparts; but the British could also boast of technical advantages. The essential difference was not of equipment, but of method. The Germans were favoured by a tactical doctrine, inspired by British prophets unhonoured in their own country, ³ which had been refined by years of close study and experiment. The main instrument of this was the Panzerdivision, a powerful and versatile organisation of tank crews, gunners, engineers and infantry all trained to work in close harmony, and it had no parallel in the British Army, a fact so clouded by terminology that it was seldom perceived. British tanks there were, of course, and armoured battalions and brigades assembled in one or two armoured divisions with

mobile guns and infantry; but the theoretical foundations were insecure, tactical doctrine varied from unit to unit, and damaging heresies flourished.

¹ Including 35 I tanks of 42 and 44 R Tks lost on the 22nd at [Sidi Omar](#); see pp. 124–7.

² If the tank strength of 21 Panzer at the outset was 83 and not 120.

³ See, inter alia, Liddell Hart, *The Tanks, The History of the Royal Tank Regiment*, Vol. I, Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, p. 20, and Ropp, *War in the Modern World*, Ch. IX.

Among these was the belief that British heavy tanks, condemned by inadequate engine power to be slow-moving, should only be used to help infantry and the lighter and faster tanks should have independent roles requiring little or no co-operation with other arms. In battleaxe 7 Armoured Division had included a brigade of cruiser tanks and one of I tanks and the failure of the offensive was officially attributed in large part to their conflicting requirements. But the I tanks had in fact more than held their own with [15 Panzer Division](#) and in the long lull before crusader the Germans were much concerned to prevent the British from again using heavily armoured Matildas with artillery support to blunt the panzer arm. Their fears were groundless. The planners of crusader constructed separate compartments for the two types of tanks and only the cruisers were to tackle the enemy armour. The consequence by the end of the 22nd was the defeat of the cruiser-tank force at small cost to the panzer divisions.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 8 – THE FRONTIER OPERATIONS BEGIN

CHAPTER 8

The Frontier Operations Begin

i

THE operations of 13 Corps were conducted against a background of misconceptions of which the most important was that the damage inflicted on the enemy armour in the early days was greater than 7 Armoured Division had suffered. The history of later phases has for this reason an odd air of unreality. Truth was not only stranger than fiction; it was incredible. Had the true position been known no responsible commander in 13 Corps would have accepted the commitments which led to the relief of [Tobruk](#) and took Eighth Army to the far corners of [Cyrenaica](#). The fiction that the enemy armour no longer existed as an effective force was the foundation of planning in 13 Corps, and particularly in the New Zealand Division, from the 22nd onwards.

This state of affairs arose from many causes, of which the hardy optimism of Eighth Army was not the least. In 13 Corps there was no disposition at all to take a gloomy view of events, estimates of enemy losses were accepted as a routine and could not be checked, and severe fighting took place before some units were even prepared to concede a proper respect for the enemy. Indeed the first two or three days were something of a trial for men who had crossed the frontier on the 18th in expectation of sudden and violent action and then a headlong pursuit of the enemy, and had found instead that they had to cool their heels in some nameless area of desert while the critical battles were being fought elsewhere. When highly-coloured reports came in of first engagements, these men itched more than ever to start their own tasks.

ii

It was not until ten o'clock at night on 18 November that the New Zealand Division began to pour through gaps in the frontier wire at [El Beida](#), after an uneventful day on the Egyptian side. The cold of the night pierced greatcoats, mufflers and balaclavas, and men travelling in the open shrouded themselves in blankets as the 2800-odd vehicles followed their leaders at four miles in the hour to

their new assembly areas. The 'concertina effect' when local obstacles slowed down a column and vehicles hurried afterwards to catch up with the others gave rise to speeds of 12 m.p.h. or more, which the gunners in particular found hazardous and exciting. In 4 Brigade, which veered off course and made a three-quarter turn to rectify this, the move ended in considerable confusion which was not overcome until dawn. ¹ In the new area 4 Brigade was forward to the north, with 5 and 6 Brigades to its right and left rear respectively and Divisional Headquarters Group tucked in behind the three of them, while Administration Group remained just east of the Wire. The 7th Indian Brigade was already at Libyan Sheferzen, linked by patrols of B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, to 4 Armoured Brigade at [Bir Gibni](#) on the Trigh el-Abd.



13 CORPS OPERATIONS, 19 NOVEMBER

Daylight revealed mainly domestic matters (congestion at [Divisional Headquarters](#), too great a dispersion in 5 Brigade) and no sign of enemy. Men looked curiously about them but found little change in the smooth face of the desert. Here, as on the Egyptian side, it was firm shingle with patches of sand and a thin sprinkling of scrub. It was nevertheless enemy territory and slit trenches were dug, as [General Freyberg](#) noted, on a more enthusiastic scale'.

As the day progressed the absence of enemy aircraft provoked much comment. The [RAF](#) liaison officer, Wing Commander Magill, told [Freyberg](#) he thought the Division as an air target would provide 'poor bombing' but would not be 'too bad for strafing'. At about 2.30 p.m. a few Me109Fs machine-gunned Advanced Headquarters of 13 Corps just to the east and a nearby landing ground and then flew

back over the Divisional area, where they were quickly engaged by 41 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery—the first New Zealand shots of the campaign. Shortly after midday word came that [7 Indian Brigade](#) had occupied [Bir Bu Deheua](#) without opposition and Corps soon afterwards ordered the Division to move up to the Trigh el-Abd, some 12 miles north, which it did in the late afternoon without incident. The desert was smooth and flat, lorries could drive quite fast, and units were able to take up defensive positions before it got properly dark.

Each brigade was now allotted a squadron of [8 Royal Tanks](#), though C Squadron did not join 6 Brigade until much later. The troops were reassured to see the heavily armoured Valentines driving slowly through the laagers, some of them still carrying their 'sunshields', meant to look from the air like the canopies of lorries. [Freyberg](#) had discussed the capabilities of the Infantry tanks with Lieutenant-Colonel Brooke of [8 Royal Tanks](#) in the morning. They could travel 60 miles across country and carried in first-line transport fuel for another 90 miles, to which might be added a 'good quantity

¹ See [Kippenberger](#), pp. 84–5.

of fuel' on tank transporters if these were not required to carry tanks. The purpose of this exploration of technicalities is revealed in a diary entry this day:

My feeling is that 'I don't care what the Boche is doing. I would go slap for [Tobruk](#). If we wait he will get his air [force] up. I don't think he knows where we are.'

[Freyberg](#) went ahead with preparations for the tasks already allotted in the frontier area; but when Hargest came in to discuss them he warned him of a 'possible move to [Tobruk](#)'. The relief of this fortress, he was convinced, was the key to victory and not merely a consequence of it. Hints in the afternoon of an enemy withdrawal westwards from [Halfaya](#) added weight to this opinion, and in any case made it even more likely that 13 Corps would soon be ordered to start major operations. [Freyberg](#) telephoned Corps after dark and was told that this would be next morning but probably not 'very early', and he passed this on to his brigadiers as a warning order.

The next morning, 20 November, dawned bright and good news soon came in. Ariete had lost 45 tanks and 200 prisoners and 21 Panzer had also been hard hit. Five miles to the north 4 Armoured Brigade had joined battle with some 180 tanks and [Freyberg](#), expecting quick results, got ready to move. Brigade commanders were warned they might have to advance at short notice north-eastwards to [Hafid Ridge](#) or straight to [Tobruk](#). Divisional Cavalry ¹ would lead the way, with a 25-pounder troop attached, and then 5 Brigade.

Then came a puzzling hiatus. From 5 Brigade shell bursts could be seen to the north-east and Divisional Cavalry heard the hammering of guns to the north-west and had an anxious few moments from eight tanks, which luckily proved to be Stuarts of 4 Armoured Brigade. Hopes rose with reports that the enemy in front of this brigade was retreating. But [Freyberg](#) felt the Germans might move through the frontier line to counter-attack from somewhere north-east of the Omars, or they might come against the right flank of 4 Brigade. He spoke to Corps about helping 4 Armoured Brigade if needed:

I said we were ready to go out and help. Only way to move bodily, cannot take guns without denuding ourselves. Alternatively they could come on to our flank to rally or go to our rear. If the 4 Armd Bde is ordered to rally we can take a strong bump. 'We are omnipotent. If you want us to advance let us know. If they ask for help, we will have to consider how best we can do it.' Strong Cav patrol of ours is going over to contact 4 Armd Bde. ²

¹ B Sqn was now back and B Tp of [4 Fd Regt](#) was under command, as well as seven 2-pdrs of 341 A-Tk Bty.

² [Freyberg](#)'s diary, recorded by his PA, Capt J. C. White, with the GOC's actual words in quotation marks.

A little later, when both panzer divisions were identified and located north of 4 Armoured Brigade, 13 Corps suggested to Army and 30 Corps that Gatehouse might rally if necessary 'on left flank NZ Div who are strongly posted in present area.' The patrol of Divisional Cavalry duly got in touch with Gatehouse and offered New Zealand help, which he rejected. Later in the afternoon the dual role of 4 Armoured

Brigade was dropped with Godwin-Austen's consent.

[Freyberg](#) was anxious to help and pressed the matter. He was in 'a terrific fighting mood', according to the Divisional Cavalry commander, and pointed out to the BGS 13 Corps that the New Zealand Division could be invaluable to 4 Armoured Brigade 'if they are in difficulties', particularly against [21 Panzer Division](#) which was wrongly reported to have four infantry battalions as well as its tank regiment and artillery. Hargest watched [7 Indian Brigade](#) engage enemy to the north-west and came in at 2.40 p.m. to report on this. All was favourably construed and [Freyberg](#) remarked to his GSO I, 'Can't help feeling he [the enemy] is on the run and we should help', but [Gentry](#)¹ disagreed: 'No Sir; I think he is obviously contemplating some dirty work, coming forward with a view to breaking our communications', he replied. 'Our plan may be to let him come as far this way as possible before giving him a knock.' Then came a warning order from Corps that the Division might have to move 10–11 miles forward at first light next day. This was disappointing and [Freyberg](#) rang Brigadier Harding again to say he was still willing to move this night. Harding was more cautious and asked if the Division was a little nervous about the large number of enemy tanks in the neighbourhood, to which [Freyberg](#) responded vigorously: 'Oh, Good God, we are frothing to go! There's no nervousness here.' To those around him he added, 'We are not frightened of a few tanks.'² But 13 Corps was more cautious and he was told at dusk to stay where he was in the meantime and be ready to meet attack from the north. The Division, as a matter of routine, was ready for this and so [Freyberg](#) went straight to bed.

¹ [Maj-Gen Sir William Gentry](#), KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Bronze Star (US); [Lower Hutt](#); born [London](#), 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO II NZ Div 1939–40; AA & QMG 1940–41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd 6 Bde Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff 1943–44; comd NZ Troops in Egypt, 6 NZ Div, and NZ Maadi Camp, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; 9 Bde ([Italy](#)) 1945; Deputy Chief of General Staff, 1946–47; Adjutant-General, 1949–52; Chief of General Staff, 1952–55.

² ' [General Freyberg](#) was a very practical optimist and on the facts as he knew them at the time was never foolhardy in his actions whatever he may have said.'—Gentry, letter 23 Mar 1960.

The GOC's confidence was founded like that of other senior officers on the belief that the British armour would prove too strong for its opponents. Even with both panzer divisions in the frontier area and 4 Armoured Brigade released from its protective role, there seemed no great cause for concern, though local and temporary difficulties might arise. But the morning of 21 November brought relief from even these minor anxieties. When all the German armour made off at an early hour towards [Tobruk](#), General Godwin-Austen gladly availed himself of the discretion vested in him the previous morning by the Army Commander. Quickly reassessing the situation, he ordered the New Zealand Division to advance to the Trigh Capuzzo and the Indian division to prepare an attack on the [Omar](#) forts.

battleaxe had given hints of what the New Zealanders might have to meet on their march north and in the light of that campaign [Freyberg](#) and Hargest briefly surveyed the possibilities. Hargest suggested he might 'do a Sidi Clif' on [Fort Capuzzo](#), moving up at night; but [Freyberg](#) was not at all sure that 5 Brigade would meet opposition there. Though eager to get under way he was reluctant to engage in heavy fighting until the situation cleared. 'If there's anything in it', he concluded, '[Capuzzo](#) will have to be left until next night.' 'I am quite happy', Hargest replied. 'We shall be busy after our idleness.'

The situation as understood at [Divisional Headquarters](#) was highly favourable and was reported at 11 a.m. to brigades in the following terms: '4 Armd Bde were attacking 30 enemy tanks and remainder were pursuing enemy northwest. 22 Armd Bde was moving along enemy south flank. Intercept of enemy message stated situation one "of extreme urgency".' But [Freyberg](#) was dissatisfied with the vagueness of reports from Corps and telephoned Godwin-Austen to make sure no ambiguities had crept into the various instructions passed and to provide against needless delay in unfolding the Divisional plan. ¹ Hargest's brigade would be on its way by 11.30 a.m., preceded by Divisional Cavalry. If it reached [Sidi Azeiz](#) and the next bound from there to the escarpment west of [Bardia](#) seemed open, [Freyberg](#) would report back to Corps by wireless at 2 p.m. for permission to send 4 Brigade to block the [Via Balbia](#). At the same time 6 Brigade with 44 Royal Tanks, less one

squadron, would drive to Bir el-Hariga, west of [Sidi Azeiz](#), in readiness to go on if needed to [Gambut](#) or [Tobruk](#). To all this Godwin-Austen readily agreed; but there remained one irksome possibility against which 13 Corps could not guard. The enemy in the [Omar](#) forts

¹ [Freyberg](#)'s side of the conversation was recorded and is summarised here.

might choose to break out westwards and the link between 5 Brigade and 7 [Indian Brigade](#) would be too weak to hold him. 'If he does that', [Freyberg](#) remarked, 'the long stop at [TOBRUK](#) will have to be informed and they will have to round them up.' Thus the major operations of the Division began in an atmosphere clouded only by the fear that some of the enemy in the frontier area might escape westwards.



THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION ADVANCES, AFTERNOON AND EVENING OF 21 NOVEMBER

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Divisional Cavalry had duly moved off at 11 a.m. with its three squadrons in line on a front of some ten miles, driving northwards over flat desert, past a few wrecked aircraft and on to the Trigh Capuzzo. A Squadron soon came upon [Sidi Azeiz](#), and its carriers with 2-pounder support drove off two staff cars and a handful of lorries and captured four Germans and fifty Italians, among them an officer who had been taking a bath and preferred to wave his towel in surrender rather than to cover his nakedness. A [Breda](#) gun which might have offered stern opposition had it been manned was also captured and the regiment had every reason, as [Freyberg](#) noted in

his diary, to be 'very pleased with themselves'. But the Cavalry had to push on northwards, and the element of farce in their first encounter was soon followed by a comically serious 'attack' on [Sidi Azeiz](#) by 22 Battalion in ignorance of what had gone before. This was also unopposed but uncovered more booty in the form of four more Bredas, much ammunition, seven lorries and two motor-cycles.

In the course of its advance 5 Brigade was authorised to undertake all the tasks tentatively allotted by the Divisional plan and Hargest was in a tremendous hurry to get as much done as possible before dark. When Lieutenant-Colonel [Allen](#)¹ of 21 Battalion, who was sent on ahead to reconnoitre [Hafid](#) and [Bir Ghirba](#) on the right flank, halted to brief his company commanders and the hastily-attached supporting troops,² Hargest drove up at high speed and ordered him to keep the battalion group moving. Allen therefore had to pass orders to his subordinates one at a time as they rode in turn in his car. He halted for the night just west of [Hafid](#) and the troops dug in facing east, while the rest of the brigade group settled down between there and [Sidi Azeiz](#).

Lieutenant-Colonel [Leckie](#)³ of 23 Battalion was then told to send out a reinforced company to patrol the approaches to [Fort Capuzzo](#) and, if possible, cut the water pipeline between [Bardia](#) and [Sollum](#).

¹ [Lt-Col J. M. Allen](#), m.i.d.; born [Cheadle](#), England, 3 Aug 1901; farmer; MP (Hauraki) 1938–41; CO 21 Bn May–Nov 1941; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

² Eight field guns, four Bofors, four Vickers and a section of sappers, with a handful of stretcher bearers.

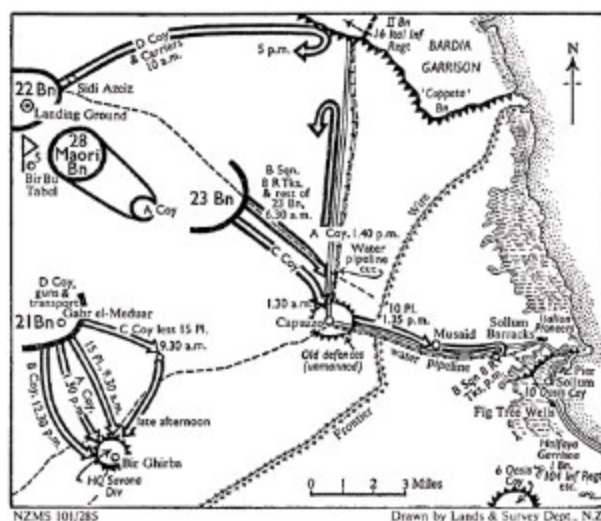
³ [Col D. F. Leckie](#), OBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Invercargill](#); born Dunedin, 9 Jun 1897; school teacher; Canterbury Mtd Rifles Regt, Anzac Mtd Div, 1916–19; CO 23 Bn Aug 1940–Mar 1941, May 1941–Jun 1942; comd 75 Sub-Area, [Middle East](#), Aug 1942–Mar 1944; wounded 25 May 1941.

With reasonable luck this company might be able to test the defences of the Fort to pave the way for a full battalion attack before dawn on the 22nd. But luck

was even more plentiful. By a miscalculation the company set out from a point a mile and a half nearer the fort than it supposed and soon found itself inside what had been regarded as outlying defences without sight or sound of enemy. The company commander, Captain Thomson,¹ saw no reason to draw back and with quick precautions against ambush marched into the heart of the fort and captured it with scarcely a shot fired. The small Italian garrison was surprised not by stealth but by noise: Thomson's company, thinking itself out of enemy earshot, had given such loud warning of its approach that the handful of defenders had no thought of hostile intrusion. Two 105-millimetre guns and their crews were captured. Thomson brought up his carriers and anti-tank guns and soon laid out his own defences. He now possessed the main telephone exchange of the frontier area and within a few minutes (with the help of a co-operative Italian officer) the water pipeline was cut. At 5 a.m. on the 22nd two lorries loaded with

¹ Maj F. S. R. Thomson, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 25 Aug 1912; draper; twice wounded; died of wounds 28 Mar 1943.

rations drove in from Bardia and three Italians were killed and a dozen captured. Further exploitation of the seizure of this track junction and communications centre followed after dawn, the enemy on the northern hinge of the frontier line taking some time to grasp what had happened.



OPERATIONS OF 5 BRIGADE, 22 NOVEMBER

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Meanwhile an instruction was signed at Brigade Headquarters at 10.35 p.m. allotting Leckie, with a supporting squadron of I tanks, the tasks of capturing [Capuzzo](#), blocking enemy movement in the area, and patrolling the road to [Musaid](#) on the way to [Sollum](#). At 1.30 a.m. Leckie got word that the first and most important of these was already accomplished. The whole battalion would nevertheless be needed to hold the large area specified and carry out subsidiary tasks, and the remainder moved forward in the early hours of the morning, reaching [Capuzzo](#) soon after dawn.

The brigade staff was also planning another operation against an objective which was to prove in the event undefended, [Hafid Ridge](#), a slight feature which had been the scene of heavy fighting in battleaxe. The instruction was signed at 11.15 p.m. and 21 Battalion Group was to be ready to attack any time after first light on the 22nd. The defences as known up to 6 November and overprinted on current maps showed only a few scattered diggings and a little wire in the area, with some transport to the south-west, and there was nothing to suggest that enemy might be found there in strength; but it was better to be sure than sorry.

iv

While 5 Brigade swung right to face [Sollum](#), 4 Brigade, at first meant to halt short of the Trigh Capuzzo, was ordered while on the move to carry on northwards to the escarpment west of [Bardia](#). This promised to be an easy journey of five or six miles, but it proved very different. After dark units struck soft ground and patches of bog. North of the Trigh Capuzzo the guiding lights veered off course and some detachments followed them while others kept to the correct bearings, only to come upon a deep and muddy trench which crossed the route. In black night and drizzling rain men sought to extricate vehicles and get past obstacles as best they could. Carriers and four-wheel-drive lorries towed less versatile vehicles across the ditch or through the mire and units sorted themselves out bit by bit south of [Menastir](#). Enough order had been restored by 5.30 a.m. on the 22nd for battalions to move off on their allotted tasks, 18 Battalion probing to the right along the lip of the ridge towards [Bardia](#), while 20 Battalion drove north to cut the [Via Balbia](#) and 19 Battalion opened out to the west to cover Brigade Headquarters.

Despite this muddy ordeal, however, the brigade gained an even greater measure of surprise than 5 Brigade. The 250-foot escarpment dominated the coast road and the ground to the north and opened up as day dawned a peaceful panorama of unsuspecting supply and service units, mostly of [21 Panzer Division](#), which were scattered along both sides of the road. First success went to a German detachment which decamped from alongside 18 Battalion at first light and made off rapidly towards [Bardia](#) with an FOO of 4 Field Regiment, though a few Germans, much loot and some 100 vehicles were later captured in the deserted camp. B Company explored eastwards to within 200 yards of [Bardia](#) defences and noted manned posts every two chains along the perimeter and a few small working parties outside. At point-blank range 4 Field Regiment meanwhile shelled clusters of vehicles at the foot of the ridge and caused the numerous cameos of camp life below to break into violent animation. When 'the Germans to the north discovered we were upon them', says [Brigadier Inglis](#), 'the stretch of country we overlooked resembled a disturbed ants' nest.' A Company of 20 Battalion rushed down the escarpment on foot to form a road block, then [Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger](#) committed B Company to attack a camp of sixty tents to the east, and finally D Company to help. B Company pushed on 500 yards north of the road with the carriers another 500 yards farther on, and the mortars took full advantage of the sweeping view from the top. By breakfast time some seventy prisoners had been taken, the rest of the enemy was roused and in full flight, and firing died down, though the [Bardia](#) guns soon began a slow bombardment of the crest in the area of 18 Battalion. [Inglis](#) began thinking of attacking [Bardia](#) and at 9.32 a.m. suggested to [Divisional Headquarters](#) that he might start to do so at ten o'clock; but [Freyberg](#) was not at hand and the matter was deferred.

▼

On its journey to Bir el-Hariga 6 Brigade met even worse going than 4 Brigade and floundered through the mud in increasing confusion until, at 1 a.m., Brigadier Barrowclough decided to halt for the night six or seven miles short of his destination. A vehicle-repair detachment of eight vehicles with two German officers and eighteen other ranks was captured on the way without a shot fired. On the way, too, Barrowclough heard that 44 Royal Tanks with two squadrons of Matildas was coming up to join him. For some time he was out of touch with [Divisional Headquarters](#),

since the wireless-link vehicle had joined 4 Brigade by mistake, and therefore could not learn what was in store for him. All he knew was that for the time being he was in divisional reserve awaiting further instructions.

These had reached [Divisional Headquarters](#), as it happened, from Corps at 6.30 p.m. in the following bald signal:

One Bde Gp will definitely be required to move west-wards 22 Nov to pass to comd 30 Corps. Location to which Bde is to go will be signalled later. Ack.

Then came further details, timed 8.45 p.m. and received at 12.50 a.m. on the 22nd:

As situation north of escarpment is still obscure 6 Inf Bde Group will move south of line BIR EL CHLETA 454403 and point 175 438404 destination follows later. Maximum AG 93 ¹ will be taken for VALENTINES. ² Second line transport will accompany Brigade group. Ack.

No urgency attached to either message and 13 Corps seemed to confirm this in reporting at 8.10 p.m. on the 21st that 170 enemy tanks were thought to have been hit and that the Italians were 'rapidly withdrawing [BIR HACHEIM](#) true to form'. In this setting the move of 6 Brigade to join 30 Corps could occasion no alarm and was linked in the eyes of 13 Corps with no crisis in the battle to the west. On the contrary, the circumstances under which such a move had been envisaged in the crusader plan were favourable and the ordering of the move by Eighth Army was taken as a good omen.

vi

Breakfast time on 22 November therefore saw the Division's operations developing according to plan and with good auguries. Soon afterwards a heavy shower of rain 'made conditions unpleasant', as the Divisional Cavalry diarist noted, and clogged rifles and Bren guns with sand. A mile or two to the south [7 Indian Brigade](#) moved into position for a midday attack on the three linked strongpoints of [Sidi Omar Nuovo](#), to be followed through to Libyan Omar, a mile to the west; but 5 Brigade knew little about this important operation.

Hargest had been refused permission to attack [Musaid](#) during the night because

of 6 Brigade's impending departure for 30 Corps; but it was occupied in the afternoon without fighting and with no sign of enemy until next morning, when sixteen Italians emerged from a cellar and surrendered to the platoon of 23 Battalion which was in occupation. B Squadron of 8 Royal Tanks followed through to the escarpment overlooking Sollum and there lost two tanks before dusk on the 22nd.

Bardia was approached from three directions. Eighteenth Battalion investigated its defences from the west, then a company of 22 Battalion advanced from Sidi Azeiz in mid-morning, and in early

¹ Probably fuel.

² Actually Matildas, as Gentry soon learned, not Valentines as Norrie had been given to understand and as he wanted.

afternoon another came from 23 Battalion with I-tank support. The defences, far from being lightly held and in a state of disrepair as had been believed, were strong and active and three men were killed and fifteen wounded before the company of the 22nd could be extricated in the late afternoon. The third probe ran into such heavy shellfire that the tanks and infantry beat a hasty retreat. The capture of Bardia would evidently call for an operation much larger than any at present contemplated and so the Division looked for other ways of exploiting the situation. There was already much profit from the activities of both brigades at no great cost to either; but not many ripe plums now awaited picking.

Hargest and Freyberg were both delighted with the capture of Capuzzo and had no idea how easy it had been. In this optimistic atmosphere another operation got under way with less than usual care and guidance from above. Patrols of 21 Battalion soon after first light on the 22nd found Bir Hafid unoccupied and Allen decided to seize it and probe towards Bir Ghirba. While a strong patrol was being assembled for this purpose he reported to Brigade Headquarters and there received orders to attack Bir Ghirba, to capture it if possible, and in any case 'definitely to contain it'. ¹ One object, and perhaps the only one, was to divert attention from the Indian attack on the Omars, of which few details were known.

Allen's plan must be inferred from what happened. The fighting patrol already in being, 15 Platoon with a section each of carriers and mortars, as the spearhead was to attack what was thought to be an outpost of the [Bir Ghirba](#) position. A and B Companies and supporting arms were then to mount the main assault south-eastwards while the rest of C Company took over Bir Hafid and D Company guarded the vehicle park.

The 'outpost', however, proved to be the main position and the fighting patrol spent a miserable hour or so establishing this fact. Under Captain [Ferguson](#)² it approached soon after 9.30 a.m. and ran into heavy mortar fire, the infantry dismounted, and their vehicles were sent back. The platoon made ground to the left, where there was slight cover, but lost a dozen men and could get no closer than 150 yards from the enemy. A sudden heavy shower of rain soaked the infantry to the skin and left them lying shivering in puddles, their small arms useless for the time being.

Ferguson spoke to Allen by R/T and the latter at once came up by carrier, heedless of the fire he attracted. A quick study of the 'buildings, concrete emplacements, dugouts, native houses, wire and petrol dump'³ ahead convinced him that this was indeed Bir

¹ 21 Bn war diary.

² [Capt C. A. Ferguson](#); born [Auckland](#), 24 Apr 1908; accountant; p.w. Nov 1941; deceased.

³ Ferguson.

Ghirba, and Allen ordered B Company up to attack on Ferguson's right. Shielded from the enemy's view by rain, the lorries took the infantry to within 600 yards of the nearest barbed wire. Then the men pressed forward on foot until the mist lifted suddenly and the fortifications stood out clearly ahead: minefields marked by low wire and behind them concrete emplacements and one or two hull-down tanks. From these came fierce fire against which no more than 150–200 yards could be gained in short dashes and at considerable cost in men. Then B Company was pinned down

still 300 yards short of the enemy.

Allen now committed A Company and its lorries drove up quickly between B Company and Ferguson's detachment. As the vehicles drove boldly forward, however, they were hit one after the other by anti-tank and small-arms fire and put out of action. The riflemen dismounted roughly level with B Company and splashed through puddles of water in a series of charges until they, too, could get no farther. Many were hit in vehicles or in the act of vacating them, and the slightest movement from those on the ground attracted keen enemy attention. The 25-pounders of 47 Field Battery gave continuous support and scored several successes but were too few to subdue the MG fire, though they hit an ammunition dump which went up in several explosions, one of them heavy enough to shower A Company with fragments.

There was little Allen could now do with his own resources and when Major [Straker](#),¹ the Brigade Major, arrived on the scene in mid-afternoon Allen asked him for another company. Brigade Headquarters refused, but authorised him instead to relinquish [Hafid Ridge](#), thereby making the rest of C Company available. With the lesson of A Company's experience in mind, C Company was stripped to troop-carrying vehicles only and these were introduced with care to avoid exposing the loaded lorries to fire of the kind which had swept through A Company. By this means the two fresh platoons got forward on the left, near Ferguson's detachment, with comparatively few casualties, though part of 15 Platoon came under fire from both sides in the process and Ferguson eventually got permission to withdraw it a short distance. Four more 25-pounders² were added to 47 Field Battery at this stage but made little difference.

At dusk C Company had almost reached the wire, but was faced with some thirty MGs in strong positions. Against such opposition only a well-prepared assault offered hope of success, and after dark the possibilities of a battalion attack by night or at first light next morning were canvassed. Allen in the end settled for an attack two

¹ [Maj T. W. Straker](#), m.i.d.; England; born NZ 2 Oct 1915; geophysicist; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped to [Switzerland](#) from [Italy](#), Nov 1943.

hours before dawn. Meanwhile the wounded received the attention denied them in daylight, ammunition was brought forward, and hot food was prepared. In the midst of this activity, against a background of burning lorries and the still-exploding enemy ammunition dump, an order came from Brigade about 12.30 a.m. on the 23rd for the battalion to withdraw.

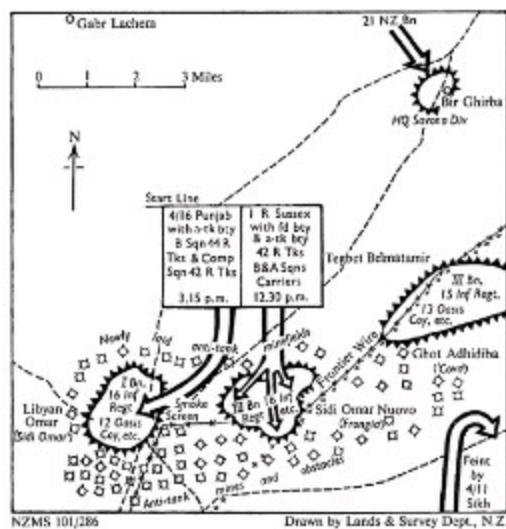
The 25-pounders continued to fire and by their flashes and the light of a burning A Company lorry the companies disengaged and withdrew to the B Echelon area, the lorries coming as far forward as they dared to pick up their loads. There a hot meal awaited the men and was eagerly eaten. [Bir Ghirba](#) had offered far sterner resistance than they had been led to expect and they were not sorry to see the last of it.

Losses in this abortive action are given in the unit diary as 13 killed and 65 wounded; but the question of why such heavy losses were accepted for such a minor (and in the end fruitless) action remains unanswered. One officer concerned remarked that [General Freyberg](#) was 'not enthusiastic' when he heard of Allen's heavy losses. [Freyberg](#) obviously intended no such costly operation and he probably wanted no more than a show of force to distract attention from the Indian attack to the south. Allen certainly acted within his instructions and, since the Brigade Major spent two or three hours with him in the afternoon without calling a halt, the misunderstanding must have been at brigade level. At all events, the headquarters of 55 Savona Division at [Bir Ghirba](#), with 600 men to defend it, was not seriously endangered by an infantry attack across flat desert in daylight without tank support and covered by very few field guns. With no anti-tank guns the attackers were throughout highly vulnerable also to a tank counter-thrust, which was by no means unlikely. Of all the New Zealand attacks in crusader this was the most unrewarding.

vii

The hasty and haphazard mounting of the [Bir Ghirba](#) attack stands in sharp contrast to the careful and thorough preparation of the Indian assault on the [Omar](#) forts, which it was meant to assist. This had been the subject of study for some

weeks at many levels and entailed close combination on the battlefield of many arms, including the RAF bomber and fighter forces. The plan was to descend from the north on the three linked strongpoints of Sidi Omar Nuovo ('Frongia') and then carry on two miles westward into the heart of Libyan Omar ('Sidi Omar' as the enemy called it), a compact and even stronger position with five main segments. Omar Nuovo was manned by III Battalion of the Italian 16 Infantry Regiment, with supporting arms which included several Italian 75-millimetre HAA guns in anti-tank roles, while Libyan Omar contained I Battalion and Regimental Headquarters reinforced by 12 Oasis Company and other German detachments, including the crews of 88-millimetre guns which could fire with deadly anti-tank effect at ranges upwards of 2000 yards. Anti-tank minefields of great depth and complexity covered southern and western approaches, some had even been hastily laid in the north which it was hoped might be free of them, and there was much barbed wire. Five miles north-east of Omar Nuovo was a similar position, 'Cova', against which 4/11 Sikh Regiment carried out several feints as the rest of 7 Indian Brigade assembled. Slit trenches which formed the infantry posts were flush with the ground and very hard to locate, making the strongpoints 'almost invisible'.¹



ATTACK ON THE OMAR FORTS, 7 INDIAN BRIGADE, 22 NOVEMBER

¹ Stevens, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 91.

The Omar Nuovo operation was in essence an infantry battalion attack, carried

out by 1 Royal Sussex, but with a weight and quality of support which might have made 21 Battalion (had they known of it) green with envy. First two formations of Marylands sprinkled the target with bombs, followed by twenty-three low-flying fighters with blazing machine guns. Twenty minutes later, at noon, the 4.5-inch guns and 6-inch howitzers of 68 Medium Regiment and the 25-pounders of 1 and 25 Field Regiments, RA, fired timed concentrations and laid a thick smoke screen to shield the right flank from the Libyan Omar guns. Two carrier platoons led off at 12.20 p.m., but the two squadrons of Matildas which were meant to be right behind them were twenty minutes late and lost much of the benefit of the artillery programme. Next came two companies of infantry in lorries, then the reserve squadron of I tanks, and finally the rest of 1 Royal Sussex, an anti-tank battery, and another field battery.

Several tanks and perhaps some carriers came to grief on minefields, some of which were unmarked. Then there was a brief pause as anti-tank guns, including '88s',¹ engaged the tanks. The infantry debussed at the minefields and burst into the enemy positions in the face of heavy fire, the tanks and carriers pressed on, and by 1.50 p.m. Omar Nuovo was captured except for a few posts. The tanks and carriers rallied to the north to form up for the assault on Libyan Omar while the Royal Sussex rounded up prisoners, attended to their many casualties, and occupied the defences.

In rallying the tanks struck more mines and the new assault was thereby delayed until 3.15 p.m. It went in on a narrow front, as minefields dictated, with B Squadron, 44 Royal Tanks, leading with troops in line ahead. Driving through the narrow neck between minefields, B Squadron found itself heading straight towards two '88s', and the leading troop, having no alternative, increased speed to close with them, making it impossible for the following tanks to open out into more effective order. Thus the squadron tackled a powerful anti-tank position 'practically line ahead',² a disastrous method, and lost thirteen of its fourteen Matildas. The remnants of 42 Royal Tanks, formed into a composite squadron, deployed more widely in an effort to escape this deadly fire and in so doing lost tanks on a minefield to the north. The infantry, this time 4/16 Punjab, were again too far behind the covering artillery fire and had little or no tank support; but they nevertheless carried on as the Royal Sussex had done with great gallantry and overran

¹ As was thought, but a German map of 16 Nov marks the Omar Nuovo guns as Italian 75-mm HAA in anti-tank roles, which were almost as good as '88s'.

² UK narrative.

many posts, taking numerous prisoners. The greater part of Libyan Omar, however, remained in enemy hands, with the menacing '88s', 12 Oasis Company, and well over a thousand Italians still resisting. By infiltration during the night the Punjabis were able to tighten their grip and gain a thousand more prisoners next day; but the western part of the fortress was stubbornly defended (and was not captured, as it happened, until the end of the month).

Omar Nuovo was thus seized and the even stronger Libyan Omar breached in the afternoon of the 22nd, and [7 Indian Brigade](#) proceeded to consolidate its gains. Some 1500 prisoners were taken, all told, at a cost of a third of that number of casualties. ¹ Both infantry battalions were hard hit, but the really crippling loss was in tanks: 42 Royal Tanks lost 35 I tanks out of 42 and only seven I tanks and seven light tanks were left in fighting order. The heavily armoured infantry tanks had fared no better than the cruiser tanks of 30 Corps against enemy anti-tank guns, and the '88s' had given terrible evidence of their power in terms of blazing and gutted Matildas. The minefields had served them well by disabling tanks for later destruction or by channelling the attack to suit the guns. Much comment was made at the time and later about the lack of a tank gun which could engage such powerful anti-tank guns to good effect; ² yet a battery of 8 Field Regiment, RA, had followed the tanks into action with the express purpose of giving close support against opportunity targets, and proper co-operation between Matildas and 25-pounders could have done much to overcome the danger.

Messervy's striking power was now greatly reduced and it was out of the question for some time to eat any farther into the frontier line. 'Cova' was strongly held, as 4/11 Sikh found in the course of its covering operations, so a Corps plan of 7.20 p.m. to take this next day and [Bir Ghirba](#) as well had to be shelved. Moreover, 5 Indian Brigade was still scattered along the L of C, leaving a wide gap between 7

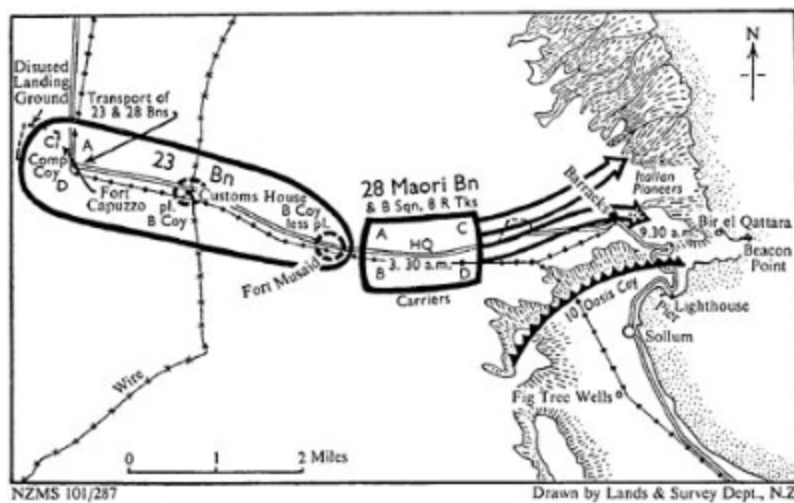
and 11 Brigades which [Central India Horse](#) did its best to patrol. It was an odd twist of fortune, however, that this scarcely favourable situation of 13 Corps gave rise to acute anxiety in the mind of the man who had designed and supervised the extension of the frontier line to [Sidi Omar](#): General Rommel. This attack and the operations of 5 New Zealand Brigade farther north were to provoke a reaction of such unreasoning violence that it robbed Rommel of the fruits of victory at [Sidi Rezegh](#).

¹ According to the [UK](#) narrative; 1 Royal Sussex lost 114 men, 4/16 Punjab 166, and 42 R Tks 52. The balance of 268 is not accounted for and the 500 may be a slight exaggeration.

² e.g., in [42 Royal Tank Regiment 1938–1944](#), p. 10.

viii

Good news meanwhile flowed continuously to Hargest's headquarters from 23 Battalion during the 22nd, outweighing any misgivings the 5 Brigade commander may have felt about the [Bir Ghirba](#) attack. Carrier patrols had by 9 a.m. taken 38 Germans and 80 Italians using the [Bardia- Sollum](#) road, and this traffic yielded by the end of the day more than 250 prisoners. After dark Leckie was told to co-operate as closely as possible with Lieutenant-Colonel [Dittmer](#) ¹ of 28 Maori Battalion, who would pass through in the night to capture [Sollum Barracks](#) at the top of the pass, the main concerns being to cut off traffic between [Sollum](#) and [Bardia](#) and patrol the pass road to prevent its demolition, thereby retaining this route for later use in supplying Eighth Army.



THE CAPTURE OF SOLLUM BARRACKS, 23 NOVEMBER
 THE CAPTURE OF SOLLUM BARRACKS, 23 NOVEMBER

The Maori attack went smoothly according to plan. The rifle companies dismounted at [Musaid](#) and advanced on foot at 3.30 a.m. on the 23rd, with C Company on the right and D on the left, each with an added platoon. Coming upon the rough circle of barrack buildings from the north-west, they surged through light rain in the stillness before a cold dawn and were soon joined by the ten

¹ [Brig G. Dittmer](#), CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born Maharahara, 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; Auckland Regt 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn); CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jan 1940–Feb 1942; wounded 23 Nov 1941; comd 1 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1942–43; 1 Div, Aug 1942–Jan 1943; [Fiji Military Forces](#) and Fiji Inf Bde Gp, 1943–45; Commander, Central Military District, 1946–48.

Valentines of B Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), under Major Sutton. A few rifle shots heralded light skirmishing among the buildings which led to the capture of dozens of willing Italian prisoners. The few Germans were less obliging, but fifty-four Italians in a cave gave themselves up to one Maori. The tanks silenced a mortar which opened fire near the water tower and helped to overcome the crew of another to the north. A troublesome machine gun on the edge of the escarpment was taken at the point of the bayonet by a section of B Company. Other gun positions identified from aerial photographs proved to be empty, though an anti-tank gun fired several times before D Company charged it. Local opposition soon collapsed and C and D Companies spread out along the escarpment to isolate the barracks from Lower Sollum, while A

and B Companies, using existing defences and digging more where required, settled in to the north and west.

Among the few casualties of this early fighting was Dittmer himself and for the time being Major Sutton took command, succeeded later in the day by Captain Love.¹ Guns on the escarpment towards [Halfaya](#) began to range accurately throughout the area and the tanks, attracting much fire, lost some of their popularity among the infantry near them. The Vickers gunners were also shelled as they carried out their characteristically thorough preparation of MMG positions, with one section facing [Halfaya](#) and the other [Bardia](#). The German company in Lower Sollum kept the pass road and its environs under small-arms fire, which killed Captain [Tureia](#)² of C Company and discouraged further exploitation thereabouts in daylight. Slowly the enemy in [Bardia](#) and Lower Sollum perceived what was happening and began to react.

Casualties in the actual assault were few, but shellfire on inhospitable ground caused several deaths and wounded many men. By dusk the dead numbered 20 and there were 34 wounded, Captain [Harvey](#)³ of A Company among them. These losses were not light in relation to the poor quality of resistance offered, and would doubtless have been fewer had some of the Maoris restrained their high spirits and investigated their new surroundings more cautiously. Booty included several 75-millimetre guns, one 25-pounder, and many German and Italian machine guns with much ammunition, as well as numerous vehicles (most of them out of order) and large quantities of food, cigarettes, and other comforts.

¹ Lt-Col E. Te W. Love, m.i.d.; born Picton, 18 May 1905; interpreter; CO 28 (Maori) Bn May–Jul 1942; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.

² [Capt P. Tureia](#); born Waiapu, 5 Jan 1897; civil servant; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³ [Maj H. D. Harvey](#); [Auckland](#); born [Adelaide](#), 31 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; Lt, AIF, 1914–18 war; wounded 23 Nov 1941; Tonga Force, Jun 1943–May 1944.

The capture of Upper Sollum sealed off the large [Halfaya- Sollum](#) position from [Bardia](#), at least so far as the non-mobile frontier garrisons were concerned, and seemed to 5 Brigade Headquarters to offer opportunities for exploitation, particularly by artillery fire. From the top of the pass 'gun-positions, trench systems, dug-outs, cookhouses, groups of vehicles and the enemy himself were easily discernible to the naked eye and most of this was within range of our 25-pdrs at [MUSAID](#)'.¹ It seemed a gunner's paradise, and the Brigade Major, himself a gunner, was much impressed. But the long haul to stock [Musaid](#) with gun ammunition made a heavy artillery programme impracticable and the [Sollum- Halfaya](#) defences were in any case less vulnerable than they looked.

For the enemy the greatest embarrassment from 5 Brigade's operations was that the frontier strongpoints could no longer get water and other supplies from [Bardia](#), and the Italian official historian blames Major-General Schmitt, commander of the East Sector, for neglecting to put [Capuzzo](#), [Musaid](#) and Upper Sollum in a proper state of defence. At Panzer Group Headquarters the impression gained ground that the British meant to capture [Sollum](#) and [Halfaya Pass](#), 'which would have given ... [them] command of the coast road most important for ... [their] supply', and when the latter remained in German hands anxiety abated. 'Only Upper Sollum was lost', the Panzer Group battle report states, with evident relief. But the presence of strong British forces in this area could not be viewed lightly and the situation at [Sidi Omar](#) was anything but reassuring, as Panzer Group learned in the following signal from Savona Division received at 2 p.m. on 23 November:

A reconnaissance force must be pushed straight forward to [Sidi Omar](#) as [Bir Ghirba](#) is not threatened at present. If possible provide immediate air support for [Sidi Omar](#) where the position is critical as a result of heavy attacks in superior force.

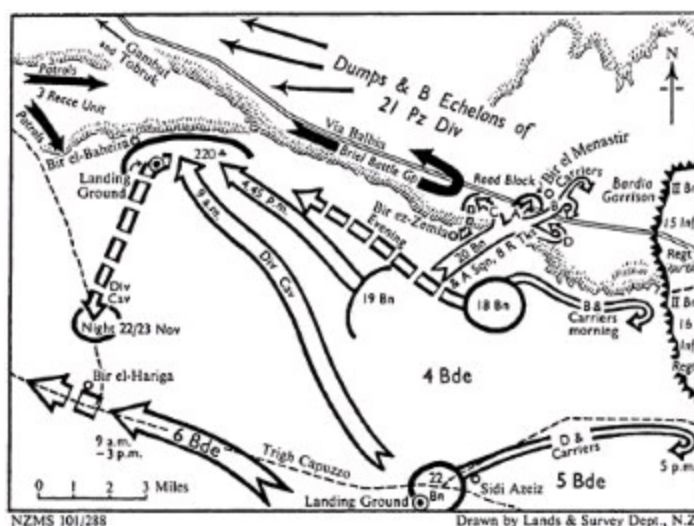
This had profound consequences; but General de Giorgis failed to indicate that Omar Nuovo and half of Libyan Omar ('[Sidi Omar](#)') had already been lost. This, too, had its repercussions. At the very time he sent the message, 4/16 Punjab was in course of ejecting the last of the defenders from the eastern half of Libyan Omar and adding a thousand to the total of prisoners taken the previous day. De Giorgis was nine miles away at [Bir Ghirba](#); but Panzer Group somehow gathered that his headquarters had

fallen into British hands.

¹ Straker, in a report dated 5 May 1945.

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In the morning of the 22nd **Freyberg** went to all three brigade headquarters and heard nothing but minor problems. At lunch time he learned that the **Tobruk** sortie had gained 'some success' and 1100 prisoners had been taken, and he took it that the garrison had by that time linked up with 30 Corps. Soon afterwards he discussed the tasks of 4 Brigade with **Brigadier Inglis**. The road block on the **Via Balbia** seemed secure and 18 Battalion and units of 5 Brigade were keeping a close watch on **Bardia**, which was too strong for **Inglis** to tackle unaided. The attack which the brigade staff was preparing was therefore called off. But **Freyberg** was uneasy about **Inglis's** third task of dominating the escarpment crossings for 15 miles west of **Menastir**. Divisional Cavalry with added field and anti-tank guns now had this role; but **Freyberg** felt it would be too much for them after dark and thought **Inglis** should send 19 Battalion. Divisional Cavalry could then withdraw into reserve. **Inglis** agreed and 19 Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell moved off at 3 p.m. and took up its new duties two hours later.



BLOCKING THE VIA BALBIA, 22 NOVEMBER

BLOCKING THE VIA BALBIA, 22 NOVEMBER

Twentieth Battalion had had a busy morning at **Menastir**. B and D Companies

had duly climbed back up the escarpment at midmorning, having cleared several encampments. Then enemy were seen west of A Company's road block and C Company was sent down to attack them. A heavy mist blotted out the ground below and when MG fire from the direction of C Company was heard, mingled with the sound of heavier calibres, [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had to hurry half a mile westwards along the crest before he could make out what was happening through a break in the mist. It looked as though C Company, which had no anti-tank guns, was faced with half a dozen tanks and a mobile gun, two mortars and 'some scores of infantry'.¹ He soon got 4 Field Regiment to fire at the 'tanks' and his 3-inch mortars at the infantry, while Captain [Fontaine](#)² withdrew C Company in good order. By noon the enemy had halted a mile west of the road block and was lightly shelling A Company.

This called for further action and [Kippenberger](#) proposed a battalion attack with I-tank support, to which [Inglis](#) readily agreed. A Squadron of [8 Royal Tanks](#) therefore descended, formed its Valentines up facing westwards, and attacked under short, sharp concentrations by 26 and 46 Field Batteries. C Company followed 500 yards behind, while [Kippenberger](#) took B Company along the crest to seize whatever chance was offered of committing it below, only to get driven back in error by fire from the Valentines. But no harm was done. The enemy 'tanks' were driven off easily and 230 prisoners brought in by C Company, together with a few mortars and two infantry guns. This brought the total of prisoners in this area to about 320, including 18 Germans, while casualties in 20 Battalion were only two killed and five wounded.

A brave and resourceful German officer, Captain Briel, CO of 606 Anti-Aircraft Battalion, was [Kippenberger's](#) opponent in this action. Briel's 20-millimetre platoon had been stationed a few miles west of [Menastir](#) to protect the B Echelons of [21 Panzer Division](#), and it was this platoon with supply personnel, mostly Italian, who supplied the opposition, reinforced later by men from Briel's headquarters. The immediate object was to cover the evacuation of the dumps of 21 Panzer and lorries shuttled backwards and forwards throughout the day taking supplies westwards. By evening the dumps were almost cleared, though enough remained for Briel to order his little group to hold on until next day. It was lucky for him that observers mistook his armoured half-tracked gun carriers with their automatic 20-millimetre dual-purpose guns for tanks, and that they were unaware of the intention behind his stubborn and skilful delaying action. Both sides were, as it happened, in the happy

position of being able at the end of the day to

¹ [Kippenberger](#), letter home, 28 Feb 1942.

² [Col D. J. Fountaine](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Westport; born Westport, 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO 20 Bn 21 Jul–16 Aug 1942; 26 Bn Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jun–Oct 1944; comd NZ Adv Base Oct 1944–Sep 1945; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

congratulate themselves on a local success; but Briel's was the greater achievement and the course of the campaign might have been very different had 4 Brigade captured the bulk of the supplies of 21 Panzer, opening the way to those of the rest of [Africa Corps](#) in the [Gambut](#) area.

The methodical exploitation of the surprise gained in the night move to [Menastir](#), however, was rudely interrupted by a signal from Corps at 1.40 p.m. which [Freyberg](#) thought 'extraordinary':

Leave minimum Tps to observe enemy [BARDIA](#) and send remainder your tps clear up area North road [BARDIA- TOBRUK](#) and advance on [GAMBUT](#) which enemy aircraft still using. Advance West will best assist VZV [not deciphered] plan.

Gentry thought Godwin-Austen intended a brigade raid to [Gambut](#) airfield and back. 'Rather cunningly', he added, 'they [Corps] have put the responsibility on us of deciding what is the minimum number of troops to police [Bardia](#).' [Freyberg](#) was at the time preoccupied with 'bottling up' [Bardia](#) and sent a liaison officer to 13 Corps to explain how strong the enemy was in this area. 'Area held by 20 Bn is terribly weak', he noted in his diary. 'We don't want these people to get out and when they find a Bn instead of a Bde they will try. They counter attacked from the North of [Bardia](#) this morning. Corps Comd must know we are up against a good number of troops.' In a signal of 2.30 p.m. to 13 Corps he expressed this as follows:

6 Inf Bde now under comd 30 Corps. Presume you NOT wish take all Tps other than those guarding [BARDIA](#). Propose leaving minimum guarding western exits from [BARDIA](#) and send two bns two sqns I Tanks and Div Cav to clear up area incl

GAMBUT and North of rd **BARDIA TOBRUK** west to 46 Grid Line. Will you say if this meets Corps order. Enemy Tps on present Div front active. Do NOT recommend weakening the block South of **BARDIA** at present. Reply immediate.

Grid 46 was a north-south line just west of **Gambut** and the broken country north of the **Via Balbia** up to there still held many enemy troops and facilities; but the airfield was evidently the chief objective, as Gentry had perceived. At 4 p.m. 13 Corps signalled agreement.

Gentry went to 4 Brigade about 3.30 p.m. and in the absence of **Inglis** left orders for the brigade (less 20 Battalion) to move to Point 220, eight miles westwards above the escarpment. This was in line with the crusader operation order and caused no surprise. The brigade staff seem to have understood that they were to take over from Divisional Cavalry, and **Inglis** assumed that all that was intended was to strengthen a move already ordered. Nineteenth Battalion had gone to relieve the Cavalry and now the 18th was to follow, which it did, with Brigade Headquarters and supporting arms, at 4.25 p.m. To Gentry it was the first stage of a move to **Gambut**; but he was not ready to order the second until Corps agreed to **Freyberg's** proposals. **Freyberg** wanted 44 Royal Tanks (less a squadron) and the attached field battery to go too, but they had not yet reached 4 Brigade and steps were therefore taken to inform them of the new rendezvous. For the time being 20 Battalion at **Menastir** would retain A Squadron, **8 Royal Tanks**, as well as one field battery and other support.

Fourth Brigade (less the 20th) deployed around Bir el Baheira soon after dark. Divisional Cavalry had gone before 19 Battalion arrived and could not therefore detach the squadron which **Freyberg** also wanted to go with 4 Brigade on the **Gambut** 'raid'. Some time in the night **Brigadier Inglis** received a cyclostyled message from **Divisional Headquarters** ordering him to go to **Gambut** at first light and clear the enemy from that neighbourhood and from a 20-mile stretch of broken country north of the **Via Balbia**. This was an interesting assignment, but still no radical departure from the crusader plan, and it carried no hint that all was not well on the **Tobruk** front. On the contrary, it seemed to suggest that things had gone better than expected and that the Division could undertake even more ambitious tasks than the plan had laid down.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 9 – HEADING FOR TOBRUK

CHAPTER 9

Heading for Tobruk

i

THE tasks now confronting the New Zealand Division were indeed more ambitious than anything the crusader plan proposed; but the circumstances were far less propitious than any previously envisaged. What Freyberg concluded was that he would have to leave one brigade in isolated possession of an arc from Menastir through Capuzzo to Upper Sollum while the rest of the Division marched towards Tobruk, and he eventually chose 5 Brigade for this 'masking' role. This meant disappointing Hargest, who badly wanted to take further advantage of his position in rear of the enemy's frontier defences; but Freyberg, Inglis, and Barrowclough seemed cast for roles in an altogether larger enterprise which promised quick and complete success. Freyberg therefore did not make strong objections to splitting up his division in this way. He hoped, moreover, that the Indians would soon take over the present role of 5 Brigade and let Hargest rejoin the Division and share this success.

The view of the battle on which these hopes were founded was almost totally misleading and it was only slowly and partially corrected. The armoured battle had been lost not won and the Division was venturing westwards against a far stronger enemy than Freyberg had been led to believe. He expected 30 Corps to protect him against whatever panzer forces had survived the early fighting and looked on the strong force of I tanks now under his command¹ for help against infantry rather than tanks. As the dangers were by degrees disclosed, however, he accepted heavier and heavier commitments.

The mission to Gambut was at first mystifying. Freyberg had assured Barrowclough soon after 9 a.m. on the 22nd that 6 Brigade was expected to operate in the Gambut area as well as at Bir el

¹ 1 Army Tk Bde (less 42 R Tks), with 8 R Tks (Valentines) and 44 R Tks less B Sqn (Matildas) and 8 Fd Regt, RA; 65 A-Tk Regt, RA, was to follow.

Chleta and it was understood that for this purpose the brigade would come under 30 Corps. It was not until after 4 Brigade had left on the first stage of its journey to [Gambut](#) that any sort of solution to the mystery was offered, in the form of the first incredible intimation of the disaster which had overtaken 30 Corps. A similar disclosure, also far short of the full truth, was made in the late afternoon to Barrowclough and added to his westward journey an urgency that had hitherto been lacking.

ii

The changeover from Matildas to Valentines for 6 Brigade, in accordance with Norrie's wishes, had caused trouble and delay. [Freyberg](#) and Barrowclough were agreed that the brigade should not venture westwards without tank support; too little was known of what lay ahead. So the Matildas of 44 Royal Tanks (less one squadron) were diverted to 4 Brigade and Barrowclough had to await the arrival of C Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), with its Valentines. Barrowclough had no direct wireless link with 30 Corps and was very much in the dark about what was expected of him. All he could do was to be ready to move off as soon as the Valentines reached him. At 1.30 p.m. he issued instructions for the move to Bir el Chleta, which the I tanks (when they arrived) and 24 Battalion were to lead. There was still no great hurry so far as he knew and his scheme was that if darkness fell before the brigade reached its destination it would halt for the night. A Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), did not turn up until 3 p.m. and a quarter of an hour later the brigade group moved off. The 900-odd vehicles drove on steadily over uneven desert astride the Trigh Capuzzo at 8 miles in the hour, ¹ a pace which caused the 25-pounders to bounce merrily and gave the crews of the swaying Bofors many moments of alarm.

After a few miles, however, there came a dramatic intervention which changed the whole outlook. A liaison officer from General Norrie found his way to Barrowclough and gave an account of the armoured battle so strikingly different from any yet heard that it could scarcely be believed. The main point as far as 6 Brigade was concerned was that the Support Group of 7 Armoured Division was 'heavily pressed' ² at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and badly wanted the Valentines. These were therefore to go there post-haste without waiting for the rest of the brigade. ³

¹ With spurts of more than 12 miles per hour.

² Barrowclough's report in the 6 Bde war diary.

³ This still assumed that 6 Bde was travelling via Gabr Saleh, as Norrie had at first been led to believe, and he wanted the tanks to take the much quicker direct route.

This was a startling order and troubled Barrowclough greatly. He was highly vulnerable to tank attack while on the move, he still expected to have to fight at Bir el Chleta and [Gambut](#), and was liable to be attacked from any direction without warning. Midway as he was between 13 and 30 Corps, he could look to neither for support and could communicate with the latter only by slow and roundabout means. After some heart-burnings he decided to meet the order and instructed C Squadron's commander, Major Veale, accordingly. But his anxieties found quick relief. Veale conferred briefly with his subordinates and came back to say that he could not possibly exceed the pace at which the brigade was already travelling. This solved the immediate problem and the journey continued as before.

The liaison officer's account suggested local setback rather than general disaster in the armoured battle. He offered the whimsical and contradictory estimates of enemy tank losses then being fed back to Corps and Army and made it all the harder to comprehend how the Support Group could have got into serious trouble. Barrowclough was still thinking this over when the brigade reached Gasr el Arid and there came upon sixty vehicles and a few enemy tanks. Twenty-fourth Battalion halted and, after some uncertainty, the Valentines nosed forward, one or two anti-tank guns went into action, and a few 25-pounder rounds whistled off into the distance. At this the enemy drew off out of sight, leaving a disabled lorry and a dozen men behind, and the march was soon resumed, unhampered by one or two tanks which continued to haunt the horizon.

At some stage of the journey a messenger from 30 Corps passed unseen on his way to [General Freyberg](#), and later another, with further details of the battle. What the first had to say was duly relayed to Barrowclough as follows:

Have received orders from 30 Corps that you are to take your Bde Gp with all haste to relieve Support Gp of Armd Corps who are surrounded at [SIDI REZEGH](#) 428405. You will receive no further orders but you will start fighting and get in touch with Gen GOTT comd 7 Armd Div who is surrounded there. Recognition signal is two red very lights. Leave your 2nd line [transport] at present location or send back eastwards. You must decide quickly whether you go by rd or part on escarpment.

This sounded as though the whole of 7 Armoured Division and not just the Support Group was surrounded, a very much worse situation than the LO had suggested; but it did at least vaguely outline a course of action and Barrowclough pressed on. But it was already getting dark, Veale's tank crews were worn out, and the brigade staff with a sleepless night behind them and a day of work and worry ahead had to have food and rest. At about 8 p.m. Barrowclough therefore called a halt. After a quick meal he called up the orders group and presented his plan. The brigade would move off again at 3 a.m., with 25 and 26 Battalions leading and 24 Battalion to the right rear. Passing south of Bir el Chleta to by-pass any enemy there, he would issue fresh orders at [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#), three miles east of Point 175. He hoped to reach 175 by 8 a.m.

During the halt a Captain Clark arrived, another emissary from 30 Corps, with the following message in Norrie's handwriting:

Nov 22 Secret

To/

G.O.C. N.Z. Div or Brigadier of Selected Bde

Co-operating with 30 Corps

1. Situation as marked on Map (1030 hrs) [not preserved] L.O. has full details of our tps & enemy—also [Tobruk](#) progress.
2. Your Task in General is to secure an all round defensive locality about Pt 175 438404. Bring your Valentine Tanks.
3. After securing this, gain touch with troops of 7th Arm Bde & 5 S.A. Bde about SIDI REZEGH.
4. I suggest you shd move S of escarpment from GASR EL ARID to avoid climb later.
5. My HQs Pt 179 448360—[west of Gabr Saleh]

6. Am sending you W/T set on my frequency—(sgd) C. W. M. Norrie Lt
General30 Corps

Thus Norrie had by this time learned that the New Zealand brigade was taking the direct route along the Trigh Capuzzo; but when he specified shortly after 10.30 a.m. on the 22nd that Barrowclough should secure Point 175 he was evidently unaware that this would then have meant fighting his way through the whole of 15 Panzer. If the LO was no better informed on other points Barrowclough would have learned little that was of use to him.

iii

[Freyberg](#) was still toying with ideas of attacking [Bardia](#) or other frontier garrisons when he heard of the troubles of 30 Corps. He regretted the scarcity of 'bombardment and barrage guns' and advocated to Godwin-Austen ¹ 'a definite policy of dumping ammunition' following a conversation with the CRA. Brigadier [Miles](#) ² somehow reminded him of an earlier talk with Cunningham when the latter spoke of the desert campaigns as 'a Bde Gp War'. ³ [Freyberg](#) asked him, 'Since when?', adding, 'Against the Boche [1]

¹ In an appreciation signed at 2.15 p.m.

² [Brig R. Miles](#), CBE, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914–19; CRA 2 NZ Div 1940–41; comd 2 NZEF (UK) 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped, [Italy](#), Mar 1943; died [Spain](#), 20 Oct 1943.

³ In quotation marks in [Freyberg's](#) diary.

consider the striking power and manoeuvrability of a Division is necessary to give weight and effect to attack.' These words were to ring truer and truer as the hours and days passed.

In such a frame of mind [Freyberg](#) was not at all prepared for his next visitor, an LO from 30 Corps, with news that the Support Group was surrounded at [Sidi Rezegh](#)

and in dire need of help from 6 Brigade. This sounded so unlikely that his first impulse was to arrest the man as a spy. The impulse passed and confirmation soon came with another LO direct from Gott. On the highest priority, therefore, [Freyberg](#) sent the signal of 4.45 p.m. to Barrowclough. Yet he was still so far short of the truth about the armoured battle as to be almost in another world. The liaison officers, he wrote in his diary, 'claim the annihilation of a large part of the German tanks and drew a picture of some 60 enemy AFVs of the 2 Armd Divs hull down with A Tk arty in support being attacked by 250 tanks of 3 British Bdes.'

Hard as these reports were to understand, they seemed clear enough on one point: it was a shortage of infantry and not of tanks from which 30 Corps was suffering. This was of course what [Freyberg](#) had predicted to Cunningham and his thoughts jumped ahead from the salvation of the Support Group to the relief of [Tobruk](#). 'Had a talk to Hargest and Miles', his diary says of this episode, 'and thought of a plan to go for [Tobruk](#) leaving 3 Bns under [Kippenberger](#) to contain [Bardia](#), etc.' The first formulation of this plan was in a letter [Freyberg](#) wrote in the evening to General Godwin-Austen:

C/1398

My Dear Corps Commander,

I have seen a LO from 30 Corps and also a personal one from General Gott, 7 Armd Div.

I am taking [Musaid](#) and clearing the enemy out of the area [Capuzzo- Musaid- Salum](#). This should be done at dawn tomorrow. In view of the general situation I suggest that I re-arrange my forces around [Bardia](#) as follows:—

20 Bn and sqn tanks astride the road [Bardia- Tobruk](#) and on the escarpment.

One Bn of inf at [Musaid](#).

Two coys of inf at [Capuzzo](#) with sqn 'I' tanks.

Remaining two coys in Bde Reserve at [Sidi Azeiz](#).

Although this would leave the garrisons very weak, I could if necessary take

the remaining two bns under Brigadier Hargest and get him to join forces with [Brigadier Inglis](#) who has two bns of the 4 Inf Bde, two sqns of 'I' tanks and the Div Cav. I suggest that this force could march on [Tobruk](#) along the escarpment to break through the Bologna Div, or such other help as is necessary. I feel I could do this starting early in the morning.

If this is done it would be necessary to get the 4 Ind Div to extend their boundary up to [Capuzzo](#).

Yours sincerely,
B. C. Freyberg

P.S. I have as you know dispatched the 6 NZ Inf Bde with all haste complete with Valentines, to relieve the Support Gp. I know they will do well.

There followed a busy hour of consultation, first with Miles about the guns, then with Brigadier Watkins about 1 Army Tank Brigade, with Lieutenant-Colonel [Agar](#)¹ regarding the enormous upheaval the scheme would cause in signals arrangements, and finally with Captain Bell, who reported that 700–800 prisoners had been captured so far. Going over the situation with Colonel Gentry [Freyberg](#) concluded, 'Am convinced must get infantry Division up to attack [Tobruk](#) and get that high ground to SE [[Sidi Rezegh](#)]. Get that and the battle for [Tobruk](#) is won.'²

This go-for- [Tobruk](#) policy was feasible in the light of what [Freyberg](#) had been led to believe: the British armour had asserted its superiority over the enemy armour but felt the need of more infantry to help break through Bologna Division and join hands with the [Tobruk](#) garrison. Moreover, [Freyberg](#) had advocated some such scheme even before the campaign started, he readily returned to it, and it was entirely in character.

Other minds, however, were working parallel to his. Cunningham had given it as his opinion as early as 21 November that the [Tobruk](#) fighting would call for more infantry. By the evening of the 22nd he recognised that the British armour was now too weak to win the battle without solid help from 13 Corps, and at midnight he ordered Godwin-Austen to send the New Zealand Division to link up with the right flank of 30 Corps and co-operate in an 'attack on the enemy forces investing Tobruk',³ for which purpose 6 New Zealand Brigade would revert to [Freyberg's](#)

command. This order was quite independent of [Freyberg](#)'s current scheme and in fact went further: it meant the whole of the Division to move westwards, regardless of the frontier situation. It also presupposed, as [Freyberg](#) did, that a large British tank force remained in being. Had the Army Commander known of the crippling blow 4 Armoured Brigade had just received he would certainly not have sent this order. At 4.30 a.m. on the 23rd Godwin-Austen passed it on to [Freyberg](#) in a signal, of which there is no mention in New Zealand documents and which may not have been received:

¹ [Lt-Col G. L. Agar](#), DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 18 Jun 1905; telegraph engineer; OC Corps Sigs, WDF, Oct 1940–Feb 1941; CO 2 NZ Div Sigs Sep 1941–Sep 1942, Nov 1942–Jun 1943; OC NZ Corps of Sigs Sep 1941–Jun 1943; SSO Sigs, Army HQ, Sep 1943–Dec 1944.

² This was the ground of which [Freyberg](#) had had a scale model made for study; his insight that the main object of the first phase of the campaign should be the relief of [Tobruk](#), however, had been rejected by the main planners of Crusader.

³ UK narrative.

6 NZ Inf Bde will revert to comd NZ Div on receipt of this message. Comd NZ Div will leave minimum troops necessary to keep enemy under observation from incl [Capuzzo](#) to incl road [Bardia- Capuzzo](#) [[Bardia- Tobruk?](#)] and will march with remainder of his Div to make contact with right flank of XXX Corps. NZ Div will then co-operate in attack on enemy forces investing Tobruk. XXX Corps have been instructed to arrange assistance for NZ Div in event of concentration [sic] enemy attack during advance westwards.

The drawbacks to the scheme to put Barrowclough under Norrie's command had been explained when Cunningham flew up to Norrie's headquarters in the afternoon of the 22nd. In his report Norrie puts it thus:

[Gen Cunningham] told me that ... it appeared to him that it would become more and more an infantry battle and that he hoped that 1 S.A. Div would

soon be able to play their part as originally planned.

The question of command of 6 N.Z. Bde. was discussed and I explained that, as it was some 40 miles away, it was very difficult for me to control, unless some special arrangements had been made about communications. I was given their call sign, but this was of course useless without their frequency and it became imperative that they should be sent an anchor set, if it were to be subsequently put under my command.

I suggested that 6 N.Z. Bde. should be commanded by their own Div. Comd. or by 13 Corps. I discussed this matter with General GOTT, and to make certain, he sent off at dawn on 23 Nov. a liaison officer with W/T set and tank for the particular task of establishing contact. As events turned out, it was a most provident action on the part of G.O.C. 7 Armd. Div.

This should of course have been considered long before, when the detached role of 6 Brigade was made part of the Crusader plan. But Cunningham now wanted Godwin-Austen to assume command of all the infantry in a battle to relieve [Tobruk](#), though 13 Corps had no way of communicating with the South Africans except by LO or DR.

Effective command could not be exercised without proper wireless links and codes and Eighth Army was then curiously inflexible in these respects. For the next week the [Tobruk](#) battle was fought by elements of two corps with very different ideas of what was happening around them and what was intended. In similar circumstances Rommel would have stayed in the forward area and exerted the full force of his personality to achieve his ends. Cunningham's method, in line with the British approach, was to fly up to Norrie's headquarters or Godwin-Austen's from time to time and make his views known, issuing written orders in between times as he thought fit. But his headquarters near [Maddalena](#) remained too far behind events to exert much influence and these intermittent interventions in no sense constituted an effective command of operations.

All the senior officers concerned—Cunningham, Norrie, Godwin-Austen, Gott and [Freyberg](#)—continued to think in terms of the crusader plan with various modifications as befitted their personal misconceptions of the situation. None quite realised at this stage that the plan and the reality were utterly different and that the current scheme

to bring up more infantry for the [Tobruk](#) battle discarded all the assumptions made by the planners about the use of mobile infantry. This scheme contained the makings of another disaster like that which had befallen Gott (and which was shortly to engulf a whole South African brigade); but there were some favourable features not apparent on the surface. For one thing, the New Zealand Division was going forward a brigade or less at a time and might therefore temporarily escape identification by the vigilant German and Italian Intelligence services. Another was the yeast of anxiety working in Rommel's mind about the security of his frontier line. These and other factors produced in the end a situation of a complexity which created insoluble problems of command and communications in the higher echelons of both sides.

iv

By the morning of the 23rd [Freyberg](#) had changed his plan. Instead of taking both brigade headquarters with him and forming a third under [Kippenberger](#) for the frontier area, he now thought it better to leave the whole of 5 Brigade there under Hargest and assemble the whole of 4 Brigade at [Gambut](#). To achieve this, 22 Battalion would relieve 20 Battalion and attached troops at [Menastir](#) as soon as possible. By 6 a.m. the revised scheme had taken sufficient shape for the GSO II, Major [Sanders](#),¹ to be sent to Godwin-Austen with the following instructions:

See 13th Corps Commander and say:

- (1) We think we have cleaned up all around [Bardia](#).
 - (2) There is a considerable force of enemy in [Bardia](#). As long as he is surrounded there is no chance of his trying to get out.
 - (3) We also think we have cleaned up and occupied [Musaid](#) and Salum.²
 - (4) 4 Bde have cleaned up the wadis immediately West of [Bardia](#) halfway to the sea. I am going to relieve [Kippenberger](#) now on [Bardia-Tobruk](#) with 1 Bn of the 5 Bde and I am going to send [Kippenberger](#) with attached troops to join [Inglis'](#) 4 Bde.
 - (5) Messervey [sic] might take over command of our 5 Bde.
 - (6) I suggest Div HQ should move to [Gambut](#) area and then we should advance to 6 Bde and get the Division on a two-Bde front opposite [Tobruk](#). I suggest my HQ should move immediately and hand over situation here on [Bardia](#) front to Hargest.
-

¹ Col G. P. Sanders, DSO, m.i.d.; Auckland; born England, 2 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; BM 4 Bde 1940–41; GSO II NZ Div Apr–Dec 1941; CO 26 Bn Jun–Jul 1944; 27 (MG) Bn Nov 1944–Oct 1945; 27 Bn (Japan) Oct 1945–May 1946; Director of Training, Army HQ, 1949–53; Commander, Fiji Military Forces, 1956–58.

² The Maoris had not yet attacked Upper Sollum and there was no plan to tackle Lower Sollum.

- (7) Administration: We can carry on as we are at the moment. We have three days' water, petrol, oil, food, and ammunition in hand. We could either transfer to 30 Corps or go as we are if they put in another link.
- (8) We shall take Gambut today. I shall be ready tonight to move to join the 4 Bde.
- (9) Corps Commander could release Hargest's 5 Bde by relieving them by 4 Indian Division. I could bring him [Hargest] to Gambut and we could go on pushing on as a complete Division at the side of the Armoured Division. Our dispositions tonight will be:
- (a) We will leave 5 Bde Gp at Bardia.
 - (b) 4 Bde Gp will be in Gambut this afternoon.
 - (c) The 6 Bde Gp interposing on the flank of the Armoured Bde opposite Tobruk.
- Position Summarised

1st Phase. Move with all troops available join with 6 NZ Inf Bde and march on to Tobruk. 5 Bde to come under Indian Division.

2nd Phase. To relieve 5 Inf Bde which could come forward to join us.

Godwin-Austen readily agreed to the first phase, but pointed out that the additional troops (5 Indian Brigade) needed to put the second phase into practice could not be brought forward for some days. Meanwhile the 13 Corps Commander had replied to Freyberg's letter of the previous evening, suggesting that 4 Brigade should guard the Bardia area and 5 Brigade 'make junction with West Column'. It was unlikely, he pointed out, that 4 Indian Division would be 'able provide troops for Capuzzo until tomorrow'—a more sanguine estimate than he supplied to Sanders shortly afterwards. At 9.30 a.m. he sent the following brief signal (received at 10.50 a.m.):

Agree Phase 1. Do not send 4 Bde north track [Bardia Tobruk](#). Sanders leaving rejoin you now.

An earlier situation report (8.40 a.m.) was not received until 11 a.m. and its contents evoked less concern than they warranted, perhaps because of the rush of work related to the Division's impending departure for [Gambut](#).

1 SA Div take over responsibility for [Sidi Rezegh](#) area from 7 Armd Div. 30 Corps reports enemy now hold [Sidi Rezegh](#). 7 Armd Div withdrawn on southern flank 1 SA Div. Gds Bde masking el Gubi —? [mutilated group]

This put the current task allotted 6 Brigade in an odd light and could well have appeared highly alarming at [Divisional Headquarters](#); but it was construed otherwise. This may have been because of a more hopeful view Godwin-Austen gained in discussion with General Cunningham. He expressed this in a letter which Sanders brought back with him and delivered to [Freyberg](#) soon after the above signal:

My dear [Freyberg](#),

The Army Comd has just been here. He has arranged that—probably with effect from 24 Nov—13 Corps takes over the operations for the relief of [TOBRUK](#)—Troops under comd 13 Corps will be your Div, 4 Ind Div and at least one Inf Bde Gp of 1 S.A. Div—I am now going to see Comd 30 Corps to discover exactly what S. Africans he will hand over to me.

The general situation seems to be that the enemy still has some 100 Tanks, location NOT definitely known; that he appears to be organising a North and South position somewhere West of BIR EL GUBI: that the [SIDI REZEGH](#) situation is and will remain critical until your 6 Inf Bde Gp arrive; and that the [TOBRUCH](#) sortie is making slow progress which will be accelerated by the arrival of your 6th and 4th Bdes.

Your Liaison Officer [Sanders] has just come and I have sent you a message approving of your proposals for Phase I. You will, I hope, realise from the above that the urgency of clearing the area North of the main road [BARDIA](#) – [TOBRUK](#) is less than that of relieving the situation in the area [SIDI REZEGH](#) –

TOBRUCH. So I have asked you NOT to get committed North of the main road. BUT LOOK AFTER YOUR RIGHT FLANK in view of Enemy Tanks—Lack of 3rd Line [transport] for 4 Ind Div and lack of troops will prevent them from taking over [CAPUZZO](#) until 24 Nov and I doubt whether they could take over any distance Northwards for the present. So though I would like your troops picquetting that area to be reduced to a minimum (say two Bns and one Sqn Tanks) leaving as many as possible free to operate Eastwards [sic], I cannot hold out hopes for the whole area being taken over by 4 Ind Div, as I would like—Would you object strongly to such of your troops as have to remain being placed temporarily under command of 4 Ind Div?

Will you please send me a signal in answer to this question?

D.A. & Q.M.G. is coming with me to H.Q. [30 Corps](#)¹ to discuss all maintenance questions the answers to which I will give you as soon as I can.

Yours sincerely,

A. R. Godwin-Austen

A reasonable inference from this would be that the [Sidi Rezegh](#) fighting was a covering operation while the enemy line west of Bir el-Gubi was being formed, and for this purpose the enemy had somehow managed to gain a local and temporary superiority. It was impossible to reconcile early reports of enemy tank losses with any more ominous interpretation of the present situation; but the second paragraph of Godwin-Austen's letter left much to the imagination. [Sidi Rezegh](#) was vital both for the British armoured effort and for the junction with the garrison of [Tobruk](#). If some force other than the German armour was holding it and 'some 100 Tanks' were free to operate elsewhere, the scheme to take the New Zealand Division forward a brigade or less at a time was hazardous in the extreme. But [Freyberg](#) could not leave his 6 Brigade orphaned in the forward area and in any case his natural impulse as an old soldier was to march to the sound of the guns.

¹ Underlined in original.

envisaged and it was getting quickly worse. The two panzer divisions could still muster 170-odd tanks and Ariete some fifty and they were all taking up position with strong support to destroy the remaining British forces south of [Sidi Rezegh](#), which now included fewer than fifty effective cruiser tanks. To these fifty might be added some sixty I tanks to be brought forward by the New Zealand Division and an assortment of tanks from [Tobruk](#) if the course of the battle allowed. But there was no reason to suppose the enemy would let these tank forces combine against him, nor was such a combination an aim of Eighth Army. A crisis had indeed arisen, graver than was realised, and it could not be overcome merely by sending the bulk of the New Zealand Division westwards in the vague hope that it would join with 30 Corps to relieve [Tobruk](#). Neither the New Zealanders nor the South Africans could attack panzer divisions and it was too much to hope that they would succeed where 7 Armoured Division with 500 tanks had failed. But Cunningham and Godwin-Austen had yet to learn the extent of this failure.

[Freyberg](#) changed his mind again during the morning about which troops he would take westwards and which he would leave behind. After sending off Sanders he conceived an alternative plan to leave Colonel Dittmer ¹ with Divisional Cavalry (less one squadron), 5 Field Regiment (less one battery), and two battalions to guard [Bardia](#) and [Capuzzo](#) while Hargest with his other two battalions, his squadron of I tanks, and supporting arms should move up on the left of 4 Brigade at [Gambut](#). This would have given him an extra brigade headquarters and one more battalion for the [Sidi Rezegh](#) fighting, and it is a pity the scheme was dropped. The deciding influence here seems to have been Godwin-Austen's letter stating that 4 Indian Division could not take over [Capuzzo](#) until next day. Because of this [Freyberg](#) reverted to his earlier plan to leave Hargest behind; but he added 21 Battalion to his westbound force. Since Divisional Headquarters had been warned as early as 8.35 a.m. to be ready to move at ten, these various changes caused many last-minute readjustments and much hurried staff work. By midday the group was still not ready to move, though [Freyberg](#)'s plans had acquired enough detail for him to signal to 13 Corps as follows:

Have little information regarding enemy troops on line our advance from East. Position 6 Inf Bde will be South TRIGH CAPUZZO moving on Pt 175 438404. 4 Inf Bde is moving [GAMBUT](#). As Ind Div will not take up to [CAPUZZO](#) today am forced leave

three bns 5 Bde to mask area SALUM MUSAIID CAPUZZO BARDIA with orders to thin out

¹ Not knowing that he was hors de combat.

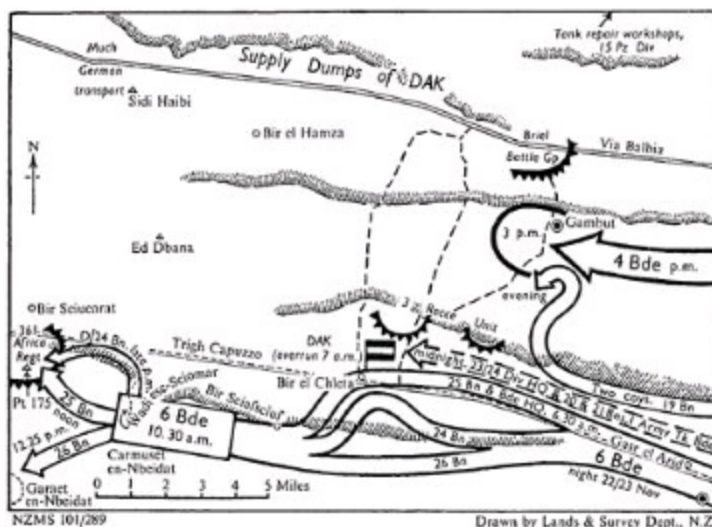
as soon as Ind Div arrive. Bns to be under Comd 5 Bde with HQ SIDI AZEIZ. Hope to hand reduced garrison over to 4 Ind Div later. Div HQ marching to just East Track Junction 456403 [Bir el Chleta] as soon as possible. Understand enemy still holding BIR EL CHLETA 4540. My object is to concentrate whole Division less 5 Bde Gp North of and in touch with 6 Bde Gp. Will move as far as I can by daylight and consider further advance tonight.

▼

[Inglis](#) was by this time well on his way to [Gambut](#) and 20 Battalion with a squadron of [8 Royal Tanks](#) was soon to follow, so that when Divisional Headquarters Group drove westwards protected by 21 Battalion and a few anti-tank guns the route should be clear. But even this scheme was to be upset.

[Freyberg](#) had telephoned about 9 a.m. to tell [Kippenberger](#) that 22 Battalion would relieve him within an hour and the first company arrived on time. The companies of 20 Battalion were accordingly forming up above the escarpment when another attack came in against A Company at the road block. What looked like twenty tanks could be seen to the west and there were a few moments of worry when it was realised that the anti-tank troop had already withdrawn. Some rounds of gun fire fell on A Company and after a short delay a troop of 4 Field Regiment replied. The anti-tank troop hurried back into action and fired some 150 rounds at long range. From a distance Captain Briel's 20-millimetre armoured gun carriers were again mistaken for tanks and [Kippenberger](#) reluctantly committed his I-tank squadron to drive them off, knowing full well that this would delay the relief for some time. The tanks duly descended to the [Via Balbia](#), but were not called on to counter-attack as the enemy had already drawn back. One 'enemy AFV' had been hit and was left at the side of the road. Briel and his small band of infantry, with one or two field pieces and a few automatic cannon, drove back towards [Gambut](#), where they were soon engaged against the mass of 4 Brigade. Meanwhile 20 Battalion

formed up again and by 1.30 p.m. was ready to move off. A quarter of an hour later 22 Battalion was firmly posted, with its A Company at the road block and the rest, including three Bofors guns and a complete MG company, on the ridge above. Lieutenant-Colonel [Andrew](#)¹ took over five German and 237 Italian prisoners and later sent them back to 5 Brigade Headquarters, now at [Sidi Azeiz](#). The enemy in the west did not reappear, to Andrew's satisfaction, though there was some movement of vehicles in the direction of [Bardia](#) later and light shelling on the escarpment a mile to the east after dark.



THE DIVISION ADVANCES WESTWARDS, 23 NOVEMBER

The Division Advances Westwards, 23 November

Fourth Brigade had meanwhile moved off at 9.15 a.m. for [Gambut](#), with C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry leading and a field battery and two companies of 19 Battalion on each flank. Behind C Squadron drove 18 Battalion, with one squadron of 44 Royal Tanks in support. The route took the group down the escarpment by Bir el Baheira and then westwards along a widening ledge between that ridge and another to the north which directly overlooked the [Via Balbia](#). After a few miles fire from the southern escarpment halted the advance and the field guns went to rather more trouble to ensure an accurate reply than the occasion warranted. An hour was thus wasted, and when the brigade moved off again [Inglis](#) posted the southern flank guard above the escarpment, thinking that 20 Battalion would soon come up to fill the gap. Some skirmishing ensued between the two companies of 19 Battalion which Colonel Hartnell led westwards along the crest and German reconnaissance troops, though the New Zealand mass was too great for the

Germans to challenge seriously. From his vantage point Hartnell could see much commotion ahead which he misconstrued. Neither he nor Inglis dreamt that the track between Gambut and Bir el Chleta was then the main supply route of Africa Corps.

¹ Brig L. W. Andrew, VC, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Ashhurst, 23 Mar 1897; Regular soldier; Wellington Regt, 1915–19; CO 22 Bn Jan 1940–Feb 1942; comd 5 Bde 27 Nov–6 Dec 1941; Area Commander, Wellington, Nov 1943–Dec 1946; Commander, Central Military District, 1948–52.

At 3 p.m. the brigade drove on to Gambut airfield with the Matildas leading and easily drove off a few confused enemy detachments. More than thirty aircraft, most of them already wrecked, were found on the ground and many valuable supplies, including 'large dumps of petrol and diesel fuel' which Inglis hesitated to destroy. Shell and mortar fire now came into the area from several directions and the brigade guns quickly replied. V/AA Battery of 8 Field Regiment, RA, fired to the west, a troop of 25 Battery, 4 Field Regiment, to the north-west and south, another to the north, and a third sniped from the edge of the escarpment overlooking the Via Balbia, 'causing considerable damage and disabling one enemy Tank'.¹ The impression that 4 Brigade was now in the heart of enemy territory was heightened by strong opposition which Hartnell met in the south, and which held him up at dusk a few miles short of the rest of the brigade. After dark he disengaged on Inglis's orders and posted his whole battalion to cover the airfield. A section of MMGs engaged targets near the Via Balbia from a wadi north-west of the airfield and after dark it fired on fixed lines.

Inglis now had the supply services of the two panzer divisions at his mercy and could easily have cut Cruewell's main lifeline; but he had been specifically forbidden to become involved north of the Via Balbia. Current opposition, more noisy than effective, came from Briel's small detachment near the Brown House at Gambut and 3 Reconnaissance Unit between Bir el Chleta and the escarpment at Point 172, the scene of a skirmish at dawn this day with 6 Brigade. Inglis had fulfilled his mission and his next task had yet to be decided. At 8 p.m. he learned that 20 Battalion was with Divisional Headquarters Group, but as late as 8.30 p.m. he was still expecting 5 Brigade to come up on his left.

After irritating delays and several minor mishaps, [Divisional Headquarters](#) moved off astride the Trigh Capuzzo, leaving Rear Headquarters with most of the Administration Group at [Sidi Azeiz](#) for the time being. Carriers of 21 Battalion led the way, but the group had only a handful of anti-tank guns and could be halted, as indeed it soon was, by the merest show of enemy strength. Vehicles closed in to meet possible tank attack and the infantry dug in; but the enemy drew away and the march was resumed. At about 5 p.m. 20 Battalion Group with its invaluable squadron of I tanks and a battery of field guns caught up and drove through the mass of transport to take the lead. Trouble expected at Gasr

¹ [Inglis](#), narrative (1952).

el Arid did not eventuate and the journey continued into the night, with occasional and erratic illumination by enemy flares in various directions. The night drive was 'very bumpy and ... confused' ¹ and [Kippenberger](#), no doubt remembering when he led 4 Brigade astray crossing into [Libya](#), checked bearings carefully every half-hour, and was greatly relieved to be able to report to [Freyberg](#) at midnight that 'we were at Bir Chleta and that the high ground looming up to the south of us was the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment.' ²

Thus Divisional Headquarters ended the day near where 6 Brigade began it. Barrowclough had meant to pass south of Bir el Chleta on his way to [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#), but his columns veered to the right in the darkness and when they halted for breakfast at the first glimmerings of light on 23 November trouble started. The leading elements were astride the Trigh Capuzzo with 25 Battalion below the escarpment and 26 Battalion just above it. The men were cold, tired and hungry and lost no time in dismounting to set up burners, boil billies, and get something to eat. The scene was only too familiar to them, an apparent confusion of vehicles of all kinds facing many directions, each like a suburban household doing its chores with little regard for its neighbours. 'Numerous fires appeared in the Bn area', says a

private of 25 Battalion, 'and also to our left ... 100 yds or less away.' No notice was taken of the latter, he adds, 'as there were tank people in support operating on the flanks.'³ The war could wait until after breakfast.

An officer saw two tanks with British markings which somehow looked odd and he drove over for a closer look; but they 'disappeared in a cloud of dust'.⁴ Then he saw a large column of lorries approaching along the track from [Gambut](#) and suddenly realised they were German. Before he could give the alarm, however, the peace of the scene was shattered. Machine guns and mortars opened fire, the 25-pounders swung into action and fired furious broadsides into the column, and enemy were replying from all directions at ranges which the increasing light showed to be ridiculously short. Twenty-fifth Battalion was in the thick of it and responded admirably. A and C Companies and the carriers engaged the column and more German vehicles on Point 172 while B Company, pinned down at first by fire from enemy who had driven between the battalion and Brigade Headquarters, quickly recovered the initiative and advanced in open order. This enemy group was trapped, its

¹ Maj T. V. Fitzpatrick, 21 Bn.

² Kippenberger, p. 90.

³ J. G. Blennerhassett (11 Pl, 25 Bn).

⁴ Maj H. G. Burton (HQ Coy).

escape blocked by the Valentines to the west and a platoon of 3 MG Company to the east, and after a few minutes it surrendered. At ranges down to 150 yards 29 Field Battery wreaked fearful destruction on the first column and many fires broke out. A brave charge by a few vehicles led by a staff car ran into a torrent of bullets from C Company and its survivors had to surrender, a German colonel among them. The carriers of the battalion were here, there and everywhere and attracted much fire, which set two of them ablaze and killed two men.

Above the escarpment 26 Battalion missed most of the excitement and took only two prisoners, though Lieutenant-Colonel Page himself, on his way to see Brigadier Barrowclough, had run into enemy and was one of the first to open fire. Major [Mantell-Harding](#),¹ the second-in-command, was taking 24 Battalion down the slope to rejoin what he thought was the rest of the brigade when the firing started. From their vantage points the leading members of the 24th could grasp the situation quicker than those below them. 'My God!' an officer exclaimed, 'It's 25 Battalion and the enemy and they don't know!'² Before the engagement began the morning was clam and voices carried clearly. Hard on this exclamation D Company of 24 Battalion could hear fire orders. Then the guns opened fire. Shortly afterwards came the fateful words 'Fix bayonets and charge' and they could see B Company of the 25th advance 'in a slow steady line'.³ Then came screams from the enemy and scores of hands in the air. D Company of the 24th rounded up many prisoners but did no fighting. The total captured is variously estimated but was probably just over 200. Losses were seven killed and about five wounded in 25 Battalion and Brigade Headquarters.

To Brigadier Barrowclough the whole episode was an embarrassment caused by faulty navigation and the consequent delay irked him greatly. It seemed to him, too, that a counter-attack was under way from the north. In the midst of the flare-up he therefore ordered Colonels [McNaught](#)⁴ and Shuttleworth to disengage as soon as they could and resume the march. McNaught appointed A Company as rearguard, with the carrier platoon and a troop each of 29 Field Battery and 33 Anti-Tank Battery. Covered by this detachment of the 25th the two battalions began to mount the escarpment at about 9.30 a.m. Firing had by this time died down, and although enemy were in evidence in several directions none

¹ [Maj A. C. W. Mantell-Harding](#), ED; [Wellington](#); born [Christchurch](#), 28 Oct 1896; solicitor; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

² 2 Lt H. Thompson (IO).

³ E. E. Heyber (18 Pl, D Coy).

⁴ Lt-Col G. J. McNaught, DSO, ED; New Plymouth; born Wanganui, 26 Nov 1896; schoolmaster; NZ MG Corps 1916–19 (2 Lt, 1919); CO 29 Bn (UK) Jun 1940–Mar 1941; 25 Bn Sep–Nov 1941; wounded 23 Nov 1941.



Ceremonial parade at Baggush before the battle. Note the escarpment in the background, like many another on the way to Tobruk

Ceremonial parade at Baggush before the battle. Note the escarpment in the background, like many another on the way to Tobruk

A chilly autumn swim at Baggush



A chilly autumn swim at Baggush



A relief model, made by the Engineers, of the battle area

A relief model, made by the Engineers, of the battle area

New Zealanders and Indians extend the desert railway



New Zealanders and Indians extend the desert railway



Fifth Brigade drives towards the frontier

Fifth Brigade drives towards the frontier

Crossing the frontier wire



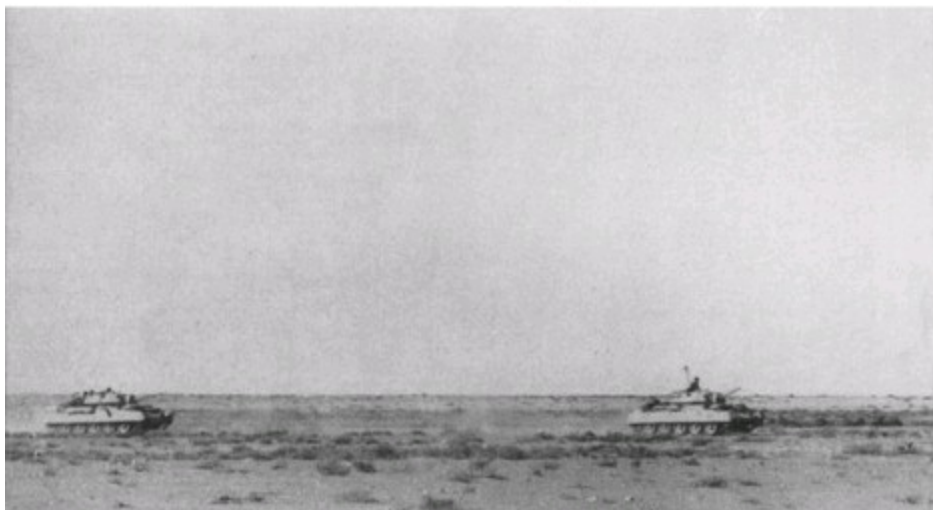
Crossing the frontier wire



A Divisional Cavalry Bren carrier pauses in muddy going inside Libya

A Divisional Cavalry Bren carrier pauses in muddy going inside [Libya](#)

Crusader tanks advance across typical scrubland



Crusader tanks advance across typical scrubland



An armoured-car patrol with Marmon-Herringtons like those of
Divisional Cavalry

An armoured-car patrol with Marmon-Herringtons like those of Divisional Cavalry

A desert convoy led by a Stuart tank ('Honey')



A desert convoy led by a Stuart tank ('Honey')



An early conference in Libya with, left to right, Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry, Brigadiers Hargest and Miles, General Freyberg, Brigadier Barrowclough and Lieutenant-Colonel Maxwell

An early conference in [Libya](#) with, left to right, Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry, Brigadiers Hargest and Miles, [General Freyberg](#), Brigadier Barrowclough and Lieutenant-Colonel Maxwell



A quick meal during a halt in the advance

A quick meal during a halt in the advance



Valentines of 8 Royal Tanks drive past New Zealand field guns

Valentines of 8 Royal Tanks drive past New Zealand field guns



New Zealand Bofors crew ready for action at dawn, 22 November 1941

New Zealand Bofors crew ready for action at dawn, 22 November 1941



Sidi Azeiz, scene of the last stand of 5 Brigade Headquarters on
27 November

Sidi Azeiz, scene of the last stand of 5 Brigade Headquarters on 27 November

Fort Capuzzo, much battered in Wavell's campaign, in BATTLEAXE, and again in CRUSADER



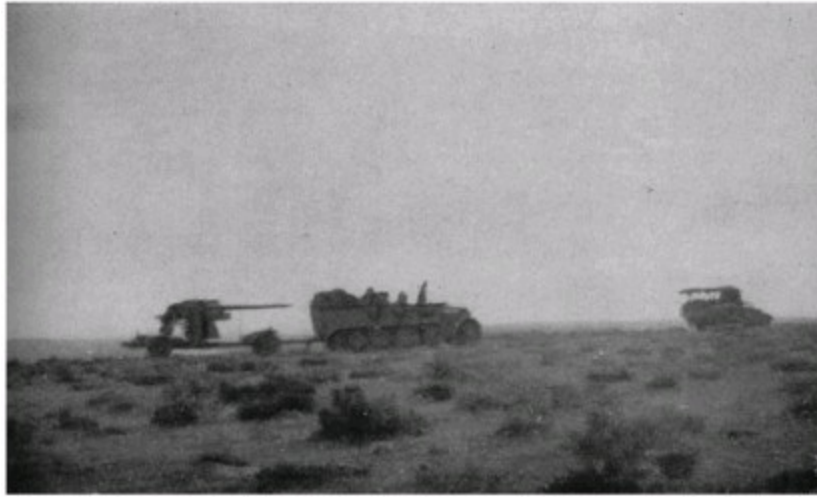
Fort Capuzzo, much battered in Wavell's campaign, in BATTLEAXE, and again in CRUSADER



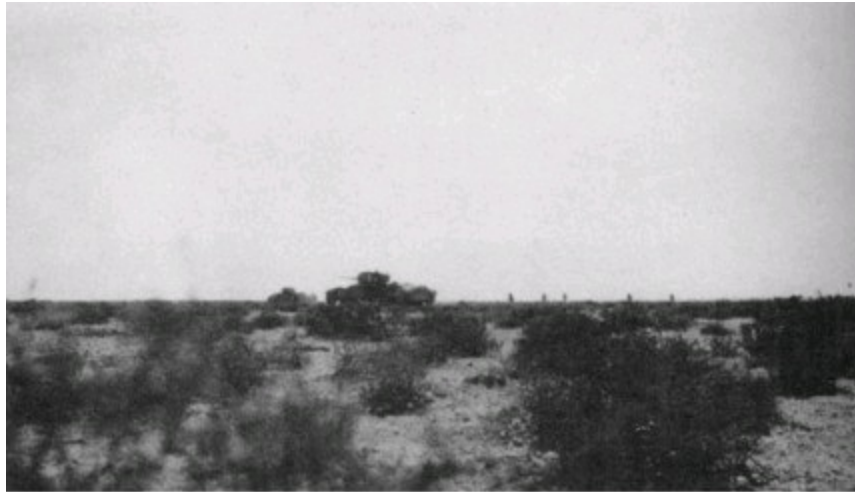
C Squadron, 8 Royal Tanks, with 6 Brigade. Probably taken after the overrunning of *Africa Corps* Headquarters at dawn on 23 November. In the centre is a group of prisoners. Most of these tanks were knocked out within a few hours

C Squadron, 8 Royal Tanks, with 6 Brigade. Probably taken after the overrunning of *Africa Corps* Headquarters at dawn on 23 November. In the centre is a group of prisoners. Most of the tanks were knocked out within a few hours

An '88' is towed away from Gambut by a 'half-track' as 4 Brigade arrives, 23 November



An '88' is towed away from **Gambut** by a 'half-track' as 4 Brigade arrives, 23 November



Men of 20 Battalion move past Valentines of A Squadron, 8 Royal Tanks, under heavy fire near Bir el Chleta, 24 November

Men of 20 Battalion move past Valentines of A Squadron, 8 Royal Tanks, under heavy fire near Bir el Chleta, 24 November



An early batch of German prisoners is marched past Valentine tanks

An early batch of German prioners is marched past Valentine tanks



The Blockhouse

The Blockhouse



The 'Mosque' at Sidi Rezegh, the tomb of an Arab saint and his son

The 'Mosque' at [Sidi Rezegh](#), the tomb of an Arab saint and his son



An artillery signals truck in action, with one man busy at the map board; behind him another crouches at the telephone

An artillery signals truck in action, with one man busy at the map board; behind him another crouches at the telephone

Infantry of the Tobruk garrison advance in the break-out battle



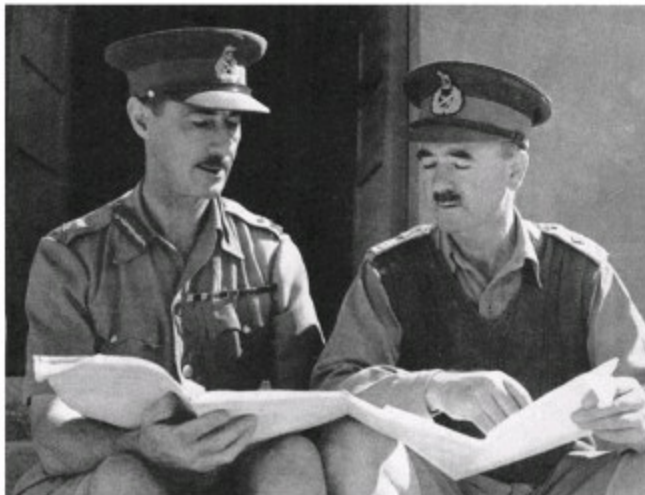
Infantry of the **Tobruk garrison advance in the break-out battle**



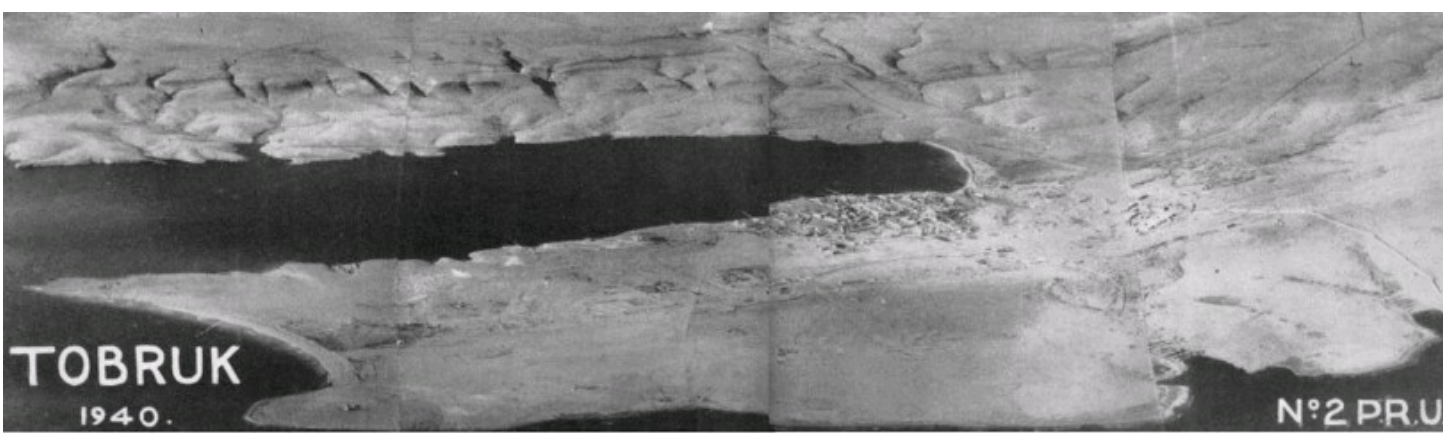
German prisoners hurrying for cover on Belhamed on 26 November.
Their escort is out of sight to the left

German prisoners hurrying for cover on [Belhamed](#) on 26 November. Their escort is out of sight to the left

Major-General Scobie confers with his predecessor, Major-General Morshead, on taking command of the Tobruk garrison



Major-General Scobie confers with his predecessor, Major-General Morshead, on taking command of the [Tobruk](#) garrison



Tobruk, an aerial mosaic looking south-eastwards towards the main CRUSADER battlefield at Sidi Rezegh. The road running off to the top left is the Via Balbia

Tobruk, an aerial mosaic looking south-eastwards towards the main crusader battlefield at Sidi Rezegh. The road running off to the top left is the Via Balbia

A and B Companies of 19 Battalion pass 4 Royal Tanks in a thrust from Ed Duda to link up with 6 Brigade, 27 November. (They were soon recalled.)



A and B Companies of 19 battalion pass 4 Royal Tanks in a thrust from Ed Duda to link up with 6 Brigade, 27 November. (They were soon recalled.)

Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell of 19 Battalion greets Brigadier Willison of 32 Army Tank Brigade at Ed Duda, the first relief of Tobruk



Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell of 19 Battalion greets Brigadier Willison of 32 Army Tank Brigade at Ed Duda, the first relief of [Tobruk](#)



Brigadier Watkins of 1 Army Tank Brigade confers with Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry after a Stuka raid. (Note mud from slit-trenches on their jackets.)

Brigadier Watkins of 1 Army Tank Brigade confers with Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry after a Stuka raid. (Note mud from slit-trenches on their jackets.)



Brigadier Inglis, commanding 4 Infantry Brigade, in summer uniform

Brigadier Inglis, commanding 4 Infantry Brigade, in summer uniform

cared to offer opposition. When A Company of the 25th departed, however, a few shots came at it more as a gesture of farewell than with intent to hold it back. Ample evidence of the brigade's short stay at Bir el Chleta was left behind in the form of wrecked and blazing vehicles, the two carriers of 25 Battalion among them.

The delay here, as things turned out, was well worth while. The bivouac so violently disturbed had been that of [Africa Corps](#) Headquarters, which was now shattered, its main wireless links captured or smashed, and most of its staff on their way under New Zealand escort to the Egyptian frontier. General Cruewell himself and his chief staff officer with a handful of others had missed the fighting only by a few minutes, though it was some time before they learned of this disaster. The careful supply arrangements for [Africa Corps](#) were plunged into disorder and no supplies got through this day to either panzer division. By the time the supply vehicles which escaped from 6 Brigade were sorted out and ready to make another attempt to reach [Africa Corps](#), 4 Brigade arrived on the scene.

As 6 Brigade drove westwards above the escarpment its right flank was raked from time to time by small-arms fire from the rough crest and the detachment of the 25th guarding this flank had to overcome a series of MG posts in wadis along the route. The brigade group carried on and passed out of sight and when the carriers remounted the ridge the flank guard hastened to regain its position, guided by the lingering haze of dust. At 10.30 a.m. Barrowclough halted as planned at the [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#).

The open, scrub-covered desert in front gave little evidence of friend or foe and disclosed its few features with such reluctance that the ground was not easy to reconcile with the map. To the left front occasional bursts of MG fire came from a group of captured Stuart tanks, formerly of 4 Armoured Brigade, which had run out of petrol. Among them were salvage parties with lorries and several of the latter drove off hastily to the south, chased by rounds from 33 Anti-Tank Battery. More fire came from the right, where enemy parties were holding out in the wadis and re-entrants of the escarpment, though there was no sign of formed bodies of troops of significant size. Below towards the coast a vehicle here and there in the distance served only to emphasise the emptiness of the scene.

A few minutes after 6 Brigade halted Norrie's LO, Captain Clark, reappeared and indicated where 5 South African Brigade was located (five miles south-south-east of the tomb of [Sidi Rezegh](#)). His information about 2 Scots Guards was out of date, however, and he brought an extraordinary request for the Valentines to be sent on a long excursion which would take them far beyond Barrowclough's control and leave him without their support. Clark said there were fifty Italian M13 tanks 'ready to be taken' ¹ at a point six miles south of the South African brigade and 15 miles south-west of 6 Brigade, and he had come to ask for the squadron of I tanks to be sent to capture them. Barrowclough agreed to do this; but it is doubtful if he grasped what a tall order it was. Lieutenant-Colonel [Weir](#) ² of 6 Field Regiment, for example, understood that the Italian tanks were only five miles away and the brigade commander probably gained much the same impression. These tanks must have been deemed vulnerable for some reason, for it would otherwise have been rash to assume that a mere squadron of about eighteen Valentines could overcome fifty Italian tanks. But Barrowclough evidently had reservations on this point and the task as finally laid down allotted guns and infantry to support the squadron of [8 Royal Tanks](#). The brigade log diary puts it thus:

C Sqn Tanks given Tp of 25 prs and tanks to go and mop up the 50 M 13 tanks—speed essential—when job is done to report back and stay on ground. Also with Tanks two Pls of Inf to help mop up.

The Valentines would therefore not be at hand to help the infantry on to Point 175, which was the main objective; but there was nothing to suggest they would be

needed. Barrowclough went forward with Weir to a vantage point 'to have a look and make a plan', as Weir wrote in a letter home. 'We got up and had a look and there wasn't a thing to be seen and I could have sworn there were no Huns holding that hill.'³ The feature itself was vague in the extreme. To most observers it looked flat desert, with perhaps a slight slope upwards towards the west. The escarpment to the north and Rugbet en-Nbeidat to the south, curling round to the west, could not be seen.

There was some reason to believe Point 175 might be defended, though not strongly, and Barrowclough decided to deploy 25 Battalion, with a field battery and an anti-tank troop,⁴ to attack it. The area to be occupied was left for Lieutenant-Colonel McNaught to decide and at a brief orders conference at 10.50 a.m. Barrowclough was chiefly interested in how soon the battalion could advance. McNaught said 11.30 and this was agreed. But this entailed a breathlessly hasty move and allowed no time for careful planning. What was evidently intended, was to make a show of force and drive off or overcome any small parties of enemy in the area with

¹ 6 Bde Log Diary.

² [Maj-Gen Sir Stephen Weir](#), KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO [6 Fd Regt](#) Sep 1939–Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941–Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commander, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, 1951–55; Chief of General Staff 1955–60; Military Adviser to NZ Govt Sep 1960–.

³ 12 Dec 1941.

⁴ 29 Bty, [6 Fd Regt](#), and K Tp of 33 A-Tk Bty.

the least possible delay. The urgency of the need to occupy the hill as a first step towards relieving the strain on 7 Armoured Division had been made very clear and Brigadier Barrowclough was determined to bring his strength to bear at the earliest possible moment. By not getting McNaught to send forward patrols in

carriers or on foot he hoped to save time; and there was in any case no apparent need for reconnaissance of a feature he had studied through his field glasses without seeing any positive sign of enemy. But his haste, impelled by the orders from 30 Corps, proved excessive. It left McNaught no more than a few minutes to give out his orders and his company commanders had a bare quarter of an hour to form up their men and pass on to them the few scraps of information available, which turned out to be most misleading. What nobody could foresee, however, was that General Rommel, on his way to inspect the armoured battle, should reach Point 175 in time to throw in his great store of skill and determination in favour of the defence (as he almost certainly did) and for 6 Brigade this was sheer bad luck.

The start line faced north-west and stretched across 800 yards of gently-sloping desert between the top of Rugbet en-Nbeidat and an unnamed wadi two miles west of Esc-Sciomar. B Company of 25 Battalion formed up on the right and D on the left with equal frontages, with C in reserve 800 yards behind D. McNaught could give no details of the enemy, but for some reason suspected that the ground to the left (i.e., south-west) of the trig point might be strongly held and told Major [Hastie](#)¹ of D Company to pay special attention to it. Some firing was heard to right rear as McNaught gave out his orders and he detailed A Company to attend to this. Three 3-inch mortars went with each forward company.

The platoons moved off at the appointed time, expecting no more than one or two machine guns to oppose their advance. The men were well dispersed and hard to see at a distance in this tufted desert and carried on silently towards a vague objective some 2000 yards away. There was little to see ahead and no sign of enemy and they were surprised when, after a very few minutes, orders came for them to halt.

Meanwhile Barrowclough decided on another expedition to help Gott. His second task, in General Norrie's words, was to 'gain touch with troops of 7th Arm[d] Bde & 5 S.A. Bde about [SIDI REZEGH](#)' (actually some miles south of there as he now knew), and he ordered Colonel Page to take 26 Battalion with another field battery and an anti-tank troop south-westwards across the desert plateau

¹ [Lt-Col A. J. R. Hastie](#), ED; Manaia; born Kakaramea, 25 Oct 1898;

to an area just east of the South Africans. The latter were facing north towards [Sidi Rezegh](#), or so he thought, and he expected Page to extend their front eastwards. This meant a journey of six miles, opening up a wide gap between 26 Battalion and the rest of the brigade; but this would soon be narrowed to two miles or less when 25 Battalion reached its objective. Moreover Barrowclough retained a useful reserve with 24 Battalion, a field battery, two anti-tank troops, a Bofors battery, an MMG company and (when it returned) the squadron of Valentines.

This was a bold and generous interpretation of the instructions from Norrie and [Freyberg](#); but before it could take full effect news came which changed the whole outlook. The group of tanks and derelicts to the left front, after a brief skirmish, yielded an ambulance car filled with British wounded and a medical officer from [8 Hussars](#) who had spent some hours in enemy hands. By 11.15 a.m. he reached Brigade Headquarters and gave a first-hand account of the overrunning of 4 Armoured Brigade Headquarters and [8 Hussars](#) during the night. He mentioned a 'formidable line and nest of A Tk guns and Tommy Guns etc' centred on a blockhouse on the escarpment just west of the Rugbet and, even more ominously, '100 enemy AFVs at first light' on Point 175, and added 'with enemy AFVs were three/four heavy guns drawn by tractors'. ¹ This put McNaught's task in quite a different light and Barrowclough at once issued orders for 25 Battalion to halt. The excursion by C Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), was now out of the question and it was promptly cancelled. McNaught was called back and told that 'advice had been received that the position was strongly held and tanks were present'. ² He would therefore have the I tanks under his command and an extra anti-tank troop. With these, he said, he could resume the advance at noon. Barrowclough asked if he could resume sooner and he replied, 'Impossible'.

Any danger of tank counter-attack was enough to warrant this change of plan; but Barrowclough was not greatly worried by the medical officer's story. It was in the first place vague, and on some points which he could check it was wrong. The doctor insisted, for one thing, that the Blockhouse was on Point 175 when Barrowclough 'knew it to be on the rising ground further west'. Moreover it was believed among the infantry, as among the tank crews themselves, that the I tanks were almost

invulnerable to anti-tank fire; ³ so the squadron of Valentines seemed a handsome reinforcement. The need for haste was still in the forefront of Barrowclough's mind and this fresh information therefore did not deter him from pressing

¹ 6 Bde Log Diary.

² McNaught, report of Mar 1942.

³ Five months after battleaxe!

on without prior reconnaissance of Point 175, nor from sending Page to link with the South Africans. Twenty-sixth Battalion duly moved off on this second task at 11.45 a.m. Barrowclough was for the time being out of touch with either 30 Corps or the New Zealand Division and the burden of duty was heavy. He felt it imperative for his brigade to do its utmost and was ready to take whatever risks his sketchy information seemed to justify.

Just beyond the horizon [Africa Corps](#) was getting ready to crush the last remnants of the British armour and end the threat to the siege of [Tobruk](#), which seemed a main object of the British offensive. At the same time 6 Brigade was unwittingly taking the first major step to mount a different and more dangerous operation against the besiegers. Both blows were struck within ten miles of each other and Cruewell and Barrowclough were equally ignorant of what the other was doing, the latter for some hours and the former for several days.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 10 – SUNDAY OF THE DEAD

CHAPTER 10

Sunday of the Dead

i

IF they counted tanks as trumps, by the morning of 23 November Cunningham and Norrie could have read doom in the bald figures of the 'tank states' then supplied, but for the swollen estimates of enemy tank losses. Even these could not make the situation less than gloomy and Cunningham was profoundly concerned, as he had every reason to be. The figures he had were even worse than Norrie's and the situation in 30 Corps was described as 'still very confused'.¹ Only 30 tanks remained in 22 Armoured Brigade and none at all in 7 Armoured Brigade, so far as Cunningham knew, whereas at Norrie's headquarters the 22nd was credited with 45 tanks and the 7th with 10, while 4 Armoured Brigade with 75 tanks was regarded as 'temporarily useless as a fighting entity'.² Norrie could do nothing more than try to build up a strong infantry position around 5 South African Brigade and hope that the remaining British armour would be able to hold off attacks by enemy armour, which was reported to be greatly depleted in strength. To this end he urged Barrowclough on and pressed General Brink to get 1 South African Brigade forward. He had discussed with Cunningham the previous afternoon the difficulties of commanding the New Zealand brigade which was on its way to him, and suggested that either Freyberg or Godwin-Austen should continue to command it. In the meantime, if the two South African brigades joined up he wanted General Brink to assume command of 'all infantry in the SIDI REZEGH area, in order to free General GOTT.'³

Daylight revealed, however, that the field company and ambulance and most of the B Echelons of 1 South African Brigade had gone on by mistake in the night and ended up some miles ahead of the main body. Hampered thus by masses of transport in front of his fighting units, Brigadier Pienaar made slow progress and there were still a few miles between the two brigades when the enemy intervened and multiplied the confusion. The history of 7 Medium

¹ UK narrative.

² Ibid.

³ Norrie, 'Narrative of Events'.

Regiment, RA (a valuable unit so far unused in the battle), says that when its 27/28 Battery drove forward 'pandemonium broke out in the Brigade column as a large German force was identified ahead moving East ¹ across the Brigade's path'. ² Norrie and Brink were helpless spectators some distance to Pienaar's right rear and General Gott, in the thick of things as usual, could make no more than minor readjustments to meet the emergency. Pienaar moved 1 South African Brigade back three miles to wait until the situation cleared.

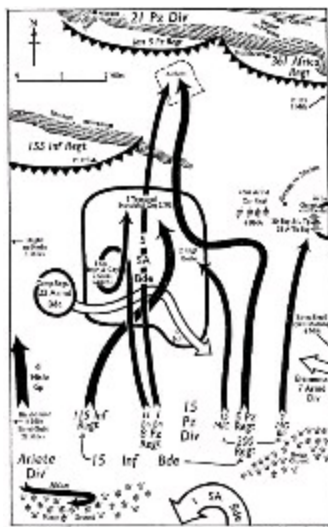
Brigadier Armstrong's 5 South African Brigade had stayed where its abortive attack of the previous afternoon had left it and was now at the head of the Corps. The 3rd Transvaal Scottish faced across a thousand yards of arid plateau (too thin a slice on which to deploy any armour available in face of German anti-tank guns) to where elements of 155 Infantry Regiment still clung to the southern escarpment. The Scottish had brought back their wounded and consolidated their positions as best they could in the dark. To their right rear 2 Regiment Botha faced east and to their left rear 1 South African Irish looked westwards across empty miles of thin scrub towards Hagfet en-Nezha, the area to which Norrie had hoped the South African position might be extended. The best that could be done for the moment in this direction was to station what was left of 22 Armoured Brigade (30 tanks by one account, 45 by another, organised in a composite regiment) on this flank, while the remnants of the Support Group lay east of 2 Botha. A handful of 7 Armoured Brigade with a few tanks, all to some degree crippled, made a brave show of supporting this flank, but was ordered south to reform. Gott hoped to get 4 Armoured Brigade to cover this flank; but most of the fragments of this brigade spent the day edging southwards in a vain effort to regain cohesion. The B Echelons of the South African brigade and the Support Group stretched across a huge tract of desert southwards almost to Pienaar's advance guards, cluttering the scene and creating an impartial confusion which for a time thwarted attempts both friendly and hostile to make sense of what was happening. The most useful increment to Armstrong's strength came from the field guns of the Support Group, which Gott ordered to 'hold by fire' ³

the escarpment north of 3 Transvaal Scottish; but this was not, as it happened, where danger really threatened. Gott later ordered up 2 Scots Guards, and this unit made its way northwards but arrived too late to fit properly into the defensive scheme before the enemy struck his main blow.

¹ More likely west.

² The History of the 7th Medium Regiment Royal Artillery, 1939–1945, p. 37.

³ UK narrative.



THE ATTACK ON 5 SOUTH AFRICAN BRIGADE, 3-6 P.M., 23 NOVEMBER

THE ATTACK ON 5 SOUTH AFRICAN BRIGADE, 3-6 P.M., 23 NOVEMBER

ii

The first blow was not as heavy as Rommel intended, because the [Africa Corps](#) Commander either ignored his orders or failed to get them in time. The Panzer Group operation order had been in course of preparation since about noon on the 22nd and was issued at 10.30 p.m., but it did not reach Bir el Chleta until 4.30 a.m. on the 23rd. The Corps diarist noted testily that it was 'much too long' and dealt with 'a host of details absolutely unimportant to [Africa Corps](#)'; but these comments may have been prompted more by the lingering labours of the cipher clerks when

Cruewell was wanting to get away than by the actual text of the message. Yet ten minutes later Neumann-Silkow signalled to Ariete that he would be attacking south-westwards at 7 a.m. and he wanted to know when and where he might expect to meet the Italians: had the order not been deciphered and the gist of it passed on to him he could scarcely have known Ariete was joining in. What seems most likely is that Cruewell got Rommel's orders at a time when his own very different plans were so far advanced he felt it too late to change them.

Both Rommel and Cruewell meant to force a decision this day in the [Sidi Rezegh](#) battle, but by opposite routes. Rommel wanted to strike with both panzer divisions from [Sidi Rezegh](#) towards Bir to el-Gubi, while the bulk of Ariete pushed north-eastwards towards [Gambut](#). All three divisions would thus take part in a 'concentric attack' to encircle and destroy the British force believed to be in the area and so end all danger of a link-up with the [Tobruk](#) garrison. The 21 st Italian Corps would meanwhile maintain the siege, the two German reconnaissance units would 'reconnoitre in force' along the [Via Balbia](#) and Trigh Capuzzo, and 155 Infantry and 361 Africa Regiments would remain in their present positions in Army Reserve. Ariete was not under Rommel's command and its part in the scheme had to be settled by agreement with General Gambara, which no doubt accounted for some of the delay.

Cruewell doubted if the Italians could even hold their ground against the British if the latter were forced back towards them, and therefore planned to send [15 Panzer Division](#) with the tank regiment of 21 Panzer round the eastern flank to link up with Ariete and drive northwards towards [Sidi Rezegh](#). The guns and infantry of 21 Panzer and Africa Divisions would be the anvil on which the panzer forces would smash the British remnants. This meant a sweep of some 20 miles in the morning to form up with Ariete south of the British force, and then in the afternoon the Axis armour would strike a sledgehammer blow northwards.

Only the first part of this, the morning advance, was disclosed in the Corps order which reached Neumann-Silkow at 12.10 a.m. and he passed this on with normal elaborations. Later he added an intention of his own: 15 Panzer was to 'destroy everything that opposed it during the day, even if it meant veering a little from its axis and direction.'¹ But there was no danger of departing too far from Cruewell's wishes, because the Corps Commander elected to travel (with a small battle headquarters) with the leading wave of tanks. He set off with his party at 5.45 a.m.,

escaping the clutches of 6 New Zealand Brigade at Bir el Chleta by a very few minutes, and took up his station in the vanguard at 6.30 a.m. Whether Neumann-Silkow, who commanded the whole of the attacking force— 15 Panzer with 5 Panzer Regiment added—was inspired or embarrassed by having his Corps Commander so far forward is not recorded. Cruewell also commanded by wireless the rest of 21 Panzer, which he wrongly thought to be directly facing the remnants of the British armour. This misconception hampered his grasp of von Ravenstein's situation and supplied an unreal background to the operations of the panzer forces, which was not entirely rectified even when (reversing the Panzer Group order) 155 Infantry and 361 Africa Regiments (according to 21 Panzer) were put under Ravenstein's command.

The [Africa Corps](#) diary describes Cruewell's intention at this stage as to 'push south to bottle up the enemy, join forces with Ariete Pz Div, and then take part in an attack against the rest of the enemy force.' 'This attack', the diary adds, 'would be made in one long wave of tanks of 5 and 8 Pz Regts and the armoured regiment of Ariete Div, and was intended to destroy the enemy.' Cruewell evidently thought his route would take him south of all but supply elements of 30 Corps and he had no idea that he was actually driving towards the narrow gap between Brink's two brigades.

The advance was held up for half an hour by the non-arrival of 5 Panzer Regiment, which actually topped the escarpment just as 15 Panzer moved off and was led forward on the left of that formation and not on the right as ordered (and disappeared over the horizon not long before 6 New Zealand Brigade appeared on the scene). A mist covering the ground at dawn had lifted and the advance to the south-west from Point 175 over 'flat, firm ground'² made fast progress. In a very few minutes the leading troops came upon enormous concentrations of British transport and destroyed them, or so the Corps diary says. Some twenty British tanks counterattacked but were repulsed and another fourteen caught refuelling

¹ 15 PZ Div war diary.

² Battle report of 5 Pz Regt.

'fled wildly south and SW', according to the diary of 15 Panzer. The scene quickly became one of the utmost confusion, gradually clarifying as the transport fled in all directions so that 15 Panzer emerged as a target for British and South African guns to the north, west and south. The opposition was nevertheless so disorganised that Cruewell seriously thought of abandoning his plan and plunging right into the British positions in an orgy of destruction, and in this he may have been supported by Neumann-Silkow. 'An immediate continuation of the attack looked very inviting', says the Corps diary. But many minor engagements were still in progress, among them one to rescue a troop of 33 Artillery Regiment captured by British tanks, ¹ duly accomplished by an anti-tank platoon of 15 Panzer which knocked out four British tanks in the course of it. The CO of I Battalion, 8 Panzer Regiment, was killed while trying to break through a column, several other German tanks were knocked out, and the regimental commander, Colonel Cramer, came very close to capture. There is much mention in German accounts of opposition from tanks and guns, and though this was localised and spasmodic it helped to disorganise the panzer forces, which were in any case confused by the enormous area covered by the British forces. To add weight to the onslaught Cruewell ordered 21 Panzer to attack southwards; but nothing came of this and he decided in the end to break away towards Bir el-Gubi to link up with Ariete ² as planned and regroup before starting the main attack.

Cruewell thought he had practically all the remnants of 30 Corps trapped in this vast pocket; but 5 Panzer Regiment, which reached [Sidi Muftah](#) on the left of the advance by 9.15 a.m., had to face south and east and use its '88s' at long range against tanks moving across this front, outside the area roped off by 15 Panzer. The rest of the division pushed on and at 12.35 p.m. met Ariete eight miles north-east of El Gubi. In so doing 8 Panzer Regiment was further disorganised by swampy ground and shellfire from several directions. Halting just in time to miss getting bogged down, 15 Infantry Brigade used its artillery to subdue the fire from the south; but the fire from the north kept increasing and because of the swamp the troops could not assemble beyond the range of the guns. It was vital for Cruewell's purposes to attack at the earliest possible moment and 2 p.m. was set for the start; but these handicaps imposed delay, extending in the end to a full hour, every minute of which was invaluable to the defence in strengthening the threatened southern and south-western flanks.

¹ Led by the South African test cricketer Bob Crisp, then a captain in 3 R Tks. See Duffus *Beyond the Laager*, pp. 33–46, and Crisp, *Brazen Chariots*, pp. 74–81.

² Actually two-thirds of it, called Di Nisio Group, which included 132 Tank Regiment.

A new principle was embodied in the 'long wave of tanks' scheme and Cruewell evidently considered that the great size of the British force and the small time available for overrunning it called for a novel approach. But what Cruewell and Neumann-Silkow agreed upon was a radical departure not only from accepted panzer tactics but from the fundamentals of their trade. Facing as they were an extremely deep position, they needed depth rather than breadth in their attack; but in general they chose the latter. They lined up all three armoured formations on a frontage of 8–10 miles, 5 Panzer Regiment on the right, 8 Panzer Regiment in the centre, and 132 Tank Regiment on the left. In the absence of the rest of 21 Panzer the guns and infantry of 15 Panzer had to be spread over two panzer regiments instead of one, so that Colonel Menny of 15 Infantry Brigade covered twice his normal front: 200 Regiment was to follow 5 Panzer Regiment, 115 Infantry Regiment to follow 8 Panzer Regiment, and the infantry of Di Nisio Group would co-operate with 132 Tank Regiment. The 33rd Artillery Regiment was to be thinly disposed over the whole front of 15 Panzer, though the Abteilung which was supposed to support 200 Regiment did not in the event arrive until after dark. So far as possible the infantry were to remain in their vehicles and follow close behind the tanks.

This scheme was weakened by ignorance of the nature and extent of the opposition, and it is not surprising that in the event only the central segment of the long line was aimed at the main centre of resistance (5 South African Brigade) and the two wings tended to skim past the flanks. This was to be partly rectified when 5 Panzer Regiment later swung westwards and Di Nisio made vaguely threatening moves against the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade to the west of 1 South African Irish. But the main weight of the attack was not concentrated to good effect and by far the greater burden was borne by 8 Panzer Regiment and 115 Infantry Regiment. Cruewell could see well enough the magnificence of the opportunity offering, but he was too impatient to take full advantage of it and at the

same time conserve his strength for further fighting. He was staking all on a knockout blow to decide the campaign.

iii

The menace of these movements to the south and south-west was plain and Gott and Brigadier Armstrong strengthened the southern flank of 5 South African Brigade with field and anti-tank guns. In the brigade area there were at least 44 25-pounders and 24 2-pounders, together with two anti-tank 18-pounders, while the remaining guns of 2 RHA supported the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade in 'a hull-down position near the south-western corner'.¹ The anti-tank guns were mostly moved to cover the southern sector, leaving only two in the west and one in the east, the north being covered if need be by 4 RHA in an anti-tank role. At least sixteen of the 25-pounders within the laager were also brought to bear to the south. More help was on the way from the guns with 26 New Zealand Battalion, though Gott did not yet know this, and much more could have come from the strong artillery of Pienaar's brigade; but the command and communications were not adequate for the task of getting this forward.² The remaining tanks of 7 Armoured Brigade, all in some way crippled, and the remnants of the infantry of the Support Group could do little and they were sent to the south-east to be out of the way. The 2nd Scots Guards when they arrived were hastily allotted positions, one company in the area of the Transvaal Scottish and at least some elements in that of the South African Irish.

This went on to the accompaniment from noon onwards of a steadily increasing bombardment by the many guns of 21 Panzer and the enemy Army Artillery in the Belhamed area and by the guns of 15 Panzer, and the Transvaal Scottish on their rocky ground, reinforced by an MMG company, calmly awaited an attack from the north. The gunners in the South African laager were badly placed to counter the fire from the north and were not well off for ammunition; but the German accounts testify to the accuracy of their fire on 15 Panzer Division.

Headquarters of 6 Brigade knew nothing of all this when 26 Battalion was sent south-westwards, and when Lieutenant-Colonel Page set out from Esc-Sciomar at 11.45 a.m. his mission was to take up a position on the right of the South Africans facing north. The four portées of L Troop led the way and reached Garaet en-Nbeidat, a mile or more east of 2 Regiment Botha, at about 12.25, though the great

size of the laager in front made it seem closer. From a slight rise in the scrub-covered desert, littered with the derelicts of battle, the men could see occasional shelling ahead to which the South African guns replied; but there seemed no cause for alarm and Page signalled back to 6 Brigade that he had reached his destination without meeting enemy, was in touch with the South Africans, and would try to link up with 25 Battalion at Point 175. Page then went forward to report to whoever was in command and before reaching the South African laager met General Gott.

¹ UK narrative.

² See Agar-Hamilton and Turner, pp. 252–3.

Page had only the vaguest idea of what was expected of him and looked to Gott for detailed instructions. He learned that Gott was expecting an attack 'supported' by tanks and gained the impression that this would be from the north. Gott gave no indication that he was at all worried about the situation and seemed convinced that the German armour was in full retreat; if he had a few more AFVs, he told Page, he would launch a pursuit at once. In the meantime he approved the present position of 26 Battalion and told Page to co-ordinate the anti-tank defence with the CO of 4 Royal Horse Artillery, who was nearby. This Page did; but he was not as hopeful as Gott about the situation as a whole. The South African perimeter nearest to him seemed cluttered with lorries and in poor anti-tank shape. The rate of fire, moreover, of the German guns was increasing and Page, a gunner by training, realised that the 25-pounders had no answer to the long-range shelling by medium and heavy guns from the north.

With some misgivings Page returned to his unit and disposed it with A Company facing south-west, B north-west, C south-east and D north-east. E Troop of 30 Field Battery he put behind the northern perimeter of this all-round position and F Troop behind the southern, and all four 2-pounder crews were told to dig in for ground action facing east, while the carrier platoon was to patrol northwards and get in touch with 25 Battalion. The 16 25-pounders of 4 RHA went into action along a line between the northern end of the Botha position and the northern perimeter of 26 Battalion. The ground was too rocky for any but shallow trenches or sangars and the

gun pits gave little protection. But the shellfire to the west seemed strangely unreal and for the first hour or more nothing came near Garaet en-Nbeidat.

A section of infantry in a lorry accompanied the carriers on their mission to 25 Battalion, and after a mile or two this party passed through the wreckage of a tank battle. Less than a thousand yards past this the carriers, which went on ahead, came upon elements of both 24 and 25 Battalions. The infantry section, waiting among the derelicts, were much moved to see other men of their brigade as distant figures advancing through fire against the defenders of Point 175. Soon the carriers came back with word that losses were heavy and both battalions were now committed to the attack. The small detachment itself came under shellfire and made its way back to Garaet en-Nbeidat, its task accomplished.

The battalion had meanwhile been watching with some concern as shellfire thickened on the South African positions, and by 2 p.m. gained a more personal interest when a few light shells landed in the 26 Battalion area. Soon after this tanks could be seen in the far distance, evidently hostile, and it seemed at least to the unit diarist that the western flank was 'not sufficiently protected'. Dust and smoke clouded the scene to the west, lit here and there by flashes of guns and bursting shells, and it was hard to tell what was happening. Soon after 3 p.m. the ominous sound of heavy small-arms fire joined the noise of the guns and it was obvious that an action of great violence was taking place, though 26 Battalion could only guess the details.

iv

What was in fact taking place was one of the heaviest tank attacks of the desert war, always to be associated by the Germans with the formidable title this day bore in the Lutheran calendar, Totensonntag—Sunday of the Dead. In keeping with this aweinspiring name some 110 tanks of 8 Panzer Regiment bore down on the South African B Echelon area, now bristling with anti-tank guns, and on the southern part of the Irish, closely followed by the two battalions of 115 Infantry Regiment in their vulnerable lorries, while on the right more than fifty tanks of 5 Panzer Regiment skirted the eastern flank and then dashed in among the South Africans, losing touch in the process with the tardy 200 Regiment. As the tanks broke from their assembly area and raced across the open ground towards the South Africans they were met by

fierce fire over open sights from some twenty-four field guns and by fire from all 2-pounders within range. Many of the latter, lurking among the lorries, did not disclose their positions until faced by a target it was impossible to miss, the 'long wave of tanks' at point-blank range.

Some of the tanks which survived this deadly fusillade were soon among the vehicles, with Lieutenant-Colonel Cramer of 8 Panzer Regiment personally leading them at the head of II Battalion on the left, and there they struck further trouble as isolated tanks or small detachments were picked off by guns farther back among the mass of transport. Much of this transport began to move to escape the fire and thereby caused more confusion on both sides, to which the black smoke of blazing tanks and transport, the grey veils of gun smoke, and the churning turbulence of dust all added their share in a pandemonium of violence. Cramer had firmly resolved to keep straight ahead into the heart of the British position, 'paying no attention to flank threats', and by 3.30 p.m. I Battalion (under Captain Kuemmel) thought it had 'crippled the enemy'. The regimental report says at this stage that 'Wherever the tanks were the enemy surrendered'; but the surviving South African and British gunners continued to fight savagely and the many pockets of resistance left behind opposed the German infantry with deadly effect, so that Kuemmel had to signal back 'for infantry to be sent up urgently to mop up the battlefield and take over the prisoners'. Both tank battalions paused for a short time to give 115 Regiment a chance to catch up; but the defence seemed quickly to recover its vigour and Cramer realised that he had no choice but to push on with or without supporting arms. I Battalion therefore fought its way slowly northwards through heavy defensive fire and Cramer led II Battalion round to the north-west, to ease the task of the following infantry by meeting another and dangerous threat in the form of a tank counter-attack by the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade.

The following infantry were all part of 15 Infantry Brigade under Colonel Menny, whose headquarters followed 200 Regiment. But it was 115 Regiment on the left which had the harder task. Advancing on a broad front, this regiment meant to keep to its lorries as long as possible; but when Lieutenant-Colonel Zincke led them past the tanks and on towards the South African lines, the fire which swept through the vehicles was more than flesh and blood could stand. Bullets, mortar bombs and anti-tank shot came from the front and left flank, where the regiment of 22 Armoured

Brigade was stationed, and 25-pounders burst among the lorries with vicious fragmentation. Still 200 yards short of their opponents the two battalions faltered, their commander, Zincke, and the CO of I Battalion, Major von Grolmann, were killed and Major Goettman of II Battalion was gravely wounded while dismounting. The infantry tumbled out of their lorries and were for a short time pinned to slit trenches or any other cover they could find,¹ and Neumann-Silkow was faced with a crisis. But he was close at hand and went forward at once to get 115 Regiment under way again. The adjutant, Lieutenant Struckmann, had meanwhile assumed command and drove forward in a light AFV to pick out a point of entry. The attached anti-tank and MMG sections held off the regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade and helped to open up a passage ahead. The resistance remained unbroken, however, and the regiment extended eastwards to resume the attack where the opposition looked weaker. This in turn had repercussions in 200 Regiment, which had likewise been daunted by the defensive fire and which Menny now ordered to swing to the right to conform with 115 Regiment, thereby taking the motor-cyclists and machine-gunners right out of the main arena and involving them in an action of their own against 26 New Zealand Battalion, as well as depriving both panzer regiments of effective infantry support.

¹ See Schmidt, pp. 105–11.

This was a matter which greatly concerned Cramer of 8 Panzer Regiment, and at 4.20 p.m. he made a remarkable decision to let I Battalion carry on unaided its difficult passage into the heart of the defences while he took II Battalion round by the left to the south to disengage and bring the infantry forward at all costs. After a massive and expensive effort, however, the scheme fell through and Cramer found himself pushing northwards once more still without infantry support, and as a last resort called forward the panzer engineer battalion in some armoured troop-carriers, the rest of the sappers travelling on the outsides of tanks. The opposition of cruiser tanks of 22 Armoured Brigade among the mass of transport was with difficulty overcome, and the regiment pushed forward in what the regimental and divisional reports both call 'an epic of bravery and soldierly self-sacrifice'. Behind it were solemn batches of prisoners in the care of the sappers and infantry and a waste of flame and smoke speckled with wrecked tanks and lorries, with here and there a gun destroyed at close quarters, its crew killed or wounded.

Cramer also had 5 Panzer Regiment under his command for this attack and the regimental report makes some scornful references to the lack of help from this quarter. But Lieutenant-Colonel Stephan had been directed too far east and plunged into the lines of 2 Regiment Botha in a right hook, with hot encouragement from the guns with 26 Battalion. Stephan also came under fire from various elements of 7 Armoured Division which thrust from the south-east, and which drove off with heavy loss a straying detachment of RECAM. But the weak oddments of British armour were too ill-informed about the situation at large to intervene to good effect.

Only the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade could do much to help the South Africans and its dwindling band of tanks fought a solid and skilful action, falling back by degrees through the huge laager, at one stage passing right through the main MDS, to be followed, with equal solicitude for the wounded, by the German tanks. Then came Brigade Headquarters, which had heard very little of what was happening after the attack started and first learned of the progress of the panzer units when a staff officer recognised German tanks only 300 yards away. Armstrong and most of his staff were captured and the tanks carried on northwards, still meeting strong opposition from the guns guarding the northern perimeter, though the Transvaal Scottish, taken from the rear, could do little and were soon badly disorganised. Lorries swarmed towards the eastern flank to escape the enemy and drove wildly towards and past 26 Battalion on their way to safety, carrying with them various non-fighting detachments and also many of the Scottish and the South African Irish who sensibly preferred flight to capture. Major Cochran, who was then acting CO of the Irish, took with him a sizable body of men and four 25-pounders were also driven through the maelstrom and got away eastwards. Lieutenant-Colonel Mason of the Botha got his Bofors troop to drive off encircling German tanks at a late stage of the fighting and saw eight tanks disabled. Mason was then wounded and taken to the MDS, already partly in enemy hands. The various groups of [Scots Guards](#) which evaded the tanks made off however they could, and the remnants of 22 Armoured Brigade rallied by a determined effort in the southwestern corner and drove boldly through the enemy, clashing in several sharp skirmishes with tanks and doing much to distract attention from the escaping lorries.

Brigadier Armstrong had sent an engineer officer, Lieutenant Nellmapius, to ask Colonel Page for anti-tank support, and he must have arrived at about 3.30 p.m. Page promptly signalled 6 Brigade for permission to send a 25-pounder troop, and while awaiting a reply concluded that he had better send both troops of 30 Battery. He still knew very little of what was going on and had suddenly to reorientate his whole position to face westwards. When he ordered up the 2-pounders of L Troop, the two which had been put in ground action were quickly winched back on to their portées, and all four drove to the western side of the position. At the same time 30 Battery was told to drive over to help the South Africans and the eight 25-pounders were hooked on and driven westwards through the battalion.

No sooner did the field guns reach the 26 Battalion FDLs in a line north of L Troop when vehicles burst out of the laager ahead and raced towards them, small-arms fire began to come through the area, and vehicles flooded through at high speed with South Africans clinging to them—the first indication to most of the 26th that they faced a South African brigade. Captain [Tolerton](#)¹ had already been startled to see through his field glasses the steady progress of German tanks through the laager and bands of South Africans being rounded up and taken prisoner. Some of the 25-pounders of 4 Royal Horse Artillery also came back towards 26 Battalion either now or a little later and went into action somewhere north of 30 Battery. The New Zealand field guns promptly halted, dropped trails, and began to engage the enemy.

¹ [Capt W. M. Tolerton; Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 11 Aug 1917; warehouseman; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

It was still very hard to sort out friend from foe, however, and several observers thought they saw British tanks on the fringe of the South African position.

After a pause of uncertain duration, what was thought to be a disabled Valentine tank on the right flank suddenly opened fire and put one of the portées out of action; the solid shot came to rest on the deck of the portée and was found to be of 50-millimetre calibre, which identified the tank as a Pzkw III. This was quickly finished off by the other three guns and they turned their attention to more tanks which now appeared, apparently from the South African lines. The range was still too

great for effective 2-pounder fire, but the 25-pounders carried on by indirect fire and later over open sights. A second 2-pounder, after firing three or four rounds, was disabled and the driver mortally wounded. This left two 2-pounders and these found a profusion of targets, which they engaged as fast as the crews could load, aim and fire, while any spare gunners manned Bren guns and rifles on the ground. More 2-pounder shot was soon called for and used up—from the two disabled portées, from the troop reserve, and more still provided from somewhere or other by the troop commander, Lieutenant [Pepper](#)¹—and the paint was soon blistering off the gun barrels. A good deal of fire of various kinds came back at L Troop and 30 Battery: light shells and mortar bombs, AP shot and much small-arms fire. Page ordered all unessential vehicles back to 6 Brigade to save needless loss and gain clearer fields of fire for the guns.

At the end of about an hour the two anti-tank guns had fired more than 300 rounds each, a phenomenal rate of fire for such equipment, at ranges between 600 and 2000 yards and mostly in the upper brackets. At such ranges the following summer the 2-pounder would not have been effective against the Pzkw III and IV; but at the time of crusader not many of the German tanks had strengthened or reinforced armour plate and they were on that account much more vulnerable. L Troop claimed a high score in tanks in this energetic action, and one careful estimate was that twenty-four were knocked out and 'only those going on fire were counted'.² This was a remarkable tally for two guns and the troop certainly deserved every praise. But it is nevertheless hard to reconcile any such total with the German accounts and, indeed, hard to place this action in detail in the reports of the two formations on the right, 5 Panzer Regiment and 200 Regiment.

¹ Lt [C. S. Pepper](#), MC; born NZ 18 Nov 1911; clerk; injured 26 Nov 1941; died [Wellington](#), 30 May 1943.

² F. C. Barker and four others.

The report of 5 Panzer Regiment admits the loss this day of twenty tanks all told (including two 'technically' damaged) and it is most unlikely that all these were lost to 26 Battalion. But this report testifies that Page's group gave Stephan much

trouble. The regiment 'came under heavy shell fire, particularly the right flank and II Bn' at 3.15 p.m. and soon after this was harassed by British tanks on the right. Then the regiment 'was opposed by very heavy A Tk fire from the MT columns, shell fire from a large number of batteries, the enemy tanks, and SP guns on the right flank,¹ and fought its way very slowly forward.' This points to 26 Battalion as providing the opposition from the right, and the report adds, 'The heavy fire from tanks and A Tk guns on the right flank hampered our movement very seriously.' Then I Battalion became entangled in the great mass of South African vehicles and fought its way forward 'under fire from both flanks, destroying enemy tanks, guns and batteries', until it linked up with 'about 15 tanks' of 8 Panzer Regiment south of the airfield of [Sidi Rezegh](#). German battle reports tend to over-estimate opposition and are often uncharitable towards neighbouring formations whether German or Italian; and it is therefore hard to know what weight to attach to this account. But 26 Battalion certainly did not knock out twenty-four tanks of this regiment, and if its score in tanks approached this number elements of 8 Panzer Regiment must somehow have become involved, which is not altogether implausible in view of the disorder into which Cramer's regiment was thrown by the fierce resistance in the South African laager.

What might reasonably be supposed in this connection is that 5 Panzer Regiment headed at first towards 26 Battalion rather than 5 South African Brigade and was encouraged to correct this error by the fire of 30 Battery, 4 RHA, and L Troop of 33 Anti-Tank Battery. But it is also likely that some of the 'tanks' claimed by L Troop were actually half-tracked carriers of 200 Regiment (as Briel's LAA carriers on the [Via Balbia](#) had been mistaken for tanks). Most of the fighting of 26 Battalion was against this regiment after it swung eastwards to conform with the change of direction of 115 Regiment. After this Lieutenant-Colonel Geissler brought up 2 MG Battalion on the right of 15 Motor Cycle Battalion and the two advanced on a broad front and in depth without tank or field artillery support.

Their attack progressed slowly, hampered at first by soft ground, and though they met less fire than 115 Regiment had faced, the men soon dismounted and continued on foot, covered by their

¹ Almost certainly the portées of L Troop.

mortars and their many MMGs. ¹ Soon after 5 p.m. both units were held up by defensive fire and between then and dusk they gained very little ground, so that the left wing was still short of the South Africans and the right faced 26 Battalion. Just before this they were assailed from both sides, the machine-gun battalion by elements of 7 Armoured Division from the south-east and the motor-cycle battalion by the few tanks of 22 Armoured Brigade which burst out of the South African laager to rally for the night. Neither unit showed much of the dash and self-sacrifice which took 115 Regiment into the heart of the South African defences and it was not until after dark that they made any substantial progress at all.

As night was falling 115 Regiment pushed two companies through to the southern escarpment and the rest of the regiment came to rest just north of the positions originally held by the Transvaal Scottish, guarded by anti-tank guns and '88s' and holding the impressive total of 1600 prisoners. To its right rear 15 Motor Cycle Battalion advanced quickly as opposition dissolved into the night and 'small rearguards gave themselves up to the attacking troops as they exploited'. ² But 2 MG Battalion, according to the regimental report, 'was again forced to ground by very heavy mortar fire about 200 metres short of the enemy defences'.

This was unquestionably 26 Battalion, which blazed away furiously at dusk and for some time after at what looked in the deceptive half-light (to a sergeant of L Troop) like 'the whole German Army'. Some of the 'mortar fire' came from 30 Battery, which fired into the oncoming vehicles and infantry at a very rapid rate until some guns ran out of ammunition and had to withdraw in search of more. A Company was hotly engaged and an NCO of the mortar platoon says the enemy 'came in droves with fixed bayonets ... until their faces were quite recognisable'. Even the reserve mortars were soon firing at maximum elevation ³ which gave a range of about 150 yards, and their fire at that distance was devastating, driving the enemy back. The second-in-command, Major Mathewson, ⁴ stood firing from the shoulder at the retreating infantry, outlined from time to time against blazing vehicles, until his rifle was unbearably hot. As one or two of the field guns, useless without ammunition and needlessly exposed in the FDLs, withdrew a short distance some of the infantry followed, thinking a general withdrawal was taking place; but Page quickly redirected them back

¹ 15 MC Bn had 13 MMGs and 33 LMGs and 2 MG Bn 36 MMGs and 10 LMGs, while a normal German motorised infantry battalion had 6 MMGs and 57 LMGs; all had 6 heavy mortars and 9 light ones.

² 200 Regt battle report.

³ i.e., minimum range, unlike the field guns.

⁴ Maj B. J. Mathewson, ED; Westport; born Westport, 18 Apr 1905; company manager; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

to their positions and a corporal of the carrier platoon saw them 'turn and walk back ... into the whole force of heavy fire.'¹ There followed a pause and then at 7 p.m. the enemy tried again, covered by tremendous fire from the massed MMGs of the machine-gun battalion. Brigadier Barrowclough had meanwhile ordered Page to fall back to Brigade Headquarters, in view of information gained from 30 Corps at 7.10 p.m. warning him to be ready to 'repel tank attack tomorrow morning' and to 'consolidate with that in view'; the fresh attack put Page's plan in jeopardy and he ordered Captain [Wesney](#)² to stage a bayonet counter-attack with B Company while A Company stood its ground and the rest of the battalion group withdrew under Mathewson.

The night had darkened, the enemy sounded very close and Wesney soon disappeared into the blackness at the head of his men. But the sounds proved deceptive and B Company charged a long way without making contact, though it ran into fire which killed Wesney and six others and wounded three more before the company was called to a halt. Lieutenant Rutherford³ of 10 Platoon searched with a small party until he found Wesney's body and two wounded men whom he brought back. Sadly 10 and 11 Platoons came back, tricked out of their prey by the night and robbed of their zest, and 12 Platoon (which did not get the order to fall back) was unwittingly left to wander in a state of high tension between the many islands of enemy with their nervous profusion of flares in search of a way back, a journey which took two days. A Company and the guns had pulled out and gone back a short distance to await B Company. 'L Troop remained', according to the troop subaltern,⁴

'until the last movable truck had gone and then moved away from the area under a canopy of flares, the enemy by this time being only a matter of 100 yards away'. B Company had stirred up a hornets' nest and the air was thick with tracer bullets, so that drivers had no wish to linger. Pepper followed the two L Troop portées in his pick-up truck, bringing with him a German he had captured, Page brought up the rear of the group with the carriers, and all made a fast journey back to Brigade Headquarters at Esc-Sciomar. The action had cost no more than 12 killed and about 20 wounded altogether in the battalion group, whereas 200 Regiment had 10 killed, 46 wounded and 61 missing, a considerable number of them due to 26 Battalion. These losses, however, were dwarfed by those of 5 South African Brigade, which at 'Sidi Rezegh' had 224 killed, 379 wounded, and about 2800 captured.

¹ B. E. Gale.

² Capt A. W. Wesley; born Invercargill, 1 Feb 1915; clerk; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³ 2 Lt F. D. Rutherford; born Christchurch, 25 Feb 1912; labourer; drowned at sea 5 Dec 1941.

⁴ 2 Lt I. G. Scott

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 11

The Attack on Point 175

i

'HERE is our present position on map', McNaught told his company commanders when he gave out his revised orders at 11.37 a.m. 'There is Pt 175 1½ miles away. You can see a tallish object, call it "Cairn". Beyond is what looks like a blockhouse. Call it "Blockhouse".'¹ The officers looked across 'a long stretch of flat ground sloping gently upwards and dotted with an occasional tussock'² on the left and with rather thicker vegetation nearer the escarpment to the north. The enemy was now thought to be 'Probably in strength and on high ground both sides' of the feature. 'Probably has tanks', McNaught added, 'and may be using captured British tanks.' But the ground ahead disclosed little of this, though the OC of 29 Battery, Major [Wilson](#),³ fixed his attention on what he thought might be MG or mortar positions and decided to fire at them until FOOs could point out better targets. But for the faint rumble of distant guns the scene was peaceful and there was nothing to suggest that the silent desert ahead held men as resolutely resolved to hold their ground as the infantry of the 25th were to gain it.

The cairn and the Blockhouse beyond were in the respective areas of II and I Battalions of 361 Africa Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Grund, which was recently formed, short of equipment, and not well thought of by General Suemmermann. I Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Harder was made up of former members of the French Foreign Legion, and perhaps II Battalion under Major Ryll also suffered from this unpatriotic association and now had the chance, as Suemmermann had rudely suggested on 12 November, of regaining 'the name of good Germans'. But their various experiences in a foreign army had made seasoned fighters of many of Grund's men, adept at using ground and holding

¹ Actually a rest house for travelling bedouin of the Abeidat tribe, though the name Blockhouse stuck to it in NZ Div. The quotation is from McNaught's orders as he reconstructed them in Mar 1942.

² S. W. Brown, Mortar Pl.

³ Maj H. S. Wilson, ED; Auckland; born Auckland, 19 Jul 1907; company secretary; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

their fire and no strangers to desert conditions. A shortage of antitank guns of which Grund had complained a few days before had been partly remedied and at least one '88' in the Blockhouse area (perhaps from 21 Panzer) could cover the western slopes of the position. The regiment was not well served by the artillery in the Belhamed area, which had a heavy programme in support of the Africa Corps attack; but its allotment of machine guns and mortars was above average and gave each battalion much greater firepower than its New Zealand counterpart. ¹ Anti-tank mines, however, may have been in short supply, as some were laid near Major Ryll's headquarters on the escarpment north of the cairn but there seem to have been none around the cairn itself, where a company or more of II Battalion was disposed.

A well planned battalion attack with strong I-tank and artillery support along the lines of the 'Sidi Clif' manoeuvres might have made short work of such defences; but McNaught had to produce a stream of orders at very short notice indeed. There was no time for finesse. 'I can almost hear myself saying to myself "make it simple, make it simple" ', he wrote later. What he told Major Veale, the I-tank commander, and the company commanders was under the circumstances a model of clarity and concision. The intention was simply 'To capture and hold at all costs "Hill 175" ' and the tanks were to advance in two waves, the first (with the carriers close behind) at 15 miles per hour to seize the objective, the second at infantry pace with C Company, 800 yards behind B and D. The tanks were to wait until the infantry were on the objective and then, after consulting McNaught, they would move back through B Company to rally. The infantry were to dig in on the 'forward half of high ground' and be ready for a 'quick counter-attack'. When A Company finished its current task it was to move up behind B. The field guns were to fire slow concentrations on what looked like trenches near the cairn and on the Blockhouse in the distance until the FOOs took over. Two anti-tank portées were to travel 800 yards behind each leading company. At 12.20 p.m. McNaught proposed to take his forward headquarters to within 500 yards of the cairn, keeping in touch with the companies by wireless.

A Company with a section of carriers had meanwhile been investigating fire to the right rear and the carriers came under anti-tank fire which 9 Platoon was sent forward to overcome. A machine gun on the edge of the escarpment was quickly dealt with and 9 Platoon carried on down the slope towards the Trigh Capuzzo.

¹ I/361 Regt (and presumably II Bn) had 8 MMGs, 61 LMGs and 10 heavy mortars (cf. no MMGs, 50 LMGs and 9 3-inch mortars in 25 Bn at the outset).

No more enemy was found, and after a quick survey the platoon began to ascend the steep, rocky slopes. Then what looked like C Squadron, **8 Royal Tanks**, passed below, though it might have been panzers returning from the depot near **Gambut**. The agreed recognition signals were given, but the tanks nevertheless opened fire and killed two men and wounded another.

C Squadron in any case reached the starting line as ordered and the first wave swept forward at top speed, closely followed by the carriers, and was soon among the enemy in shallow trenches around the cairn, where the carriers helped to round up prisoners in large numbers. In some of the numerous small wadis and re-entrants in the escarpment to the north, and in the Rugbet which curled round from south to north-west and beyond it, however, there was ample concealment for anti-tank guns and for a few German tanks which appeared in due course. These found the Valentines easy targets silhouetted on the high ground and quickly disabled three or four of them.

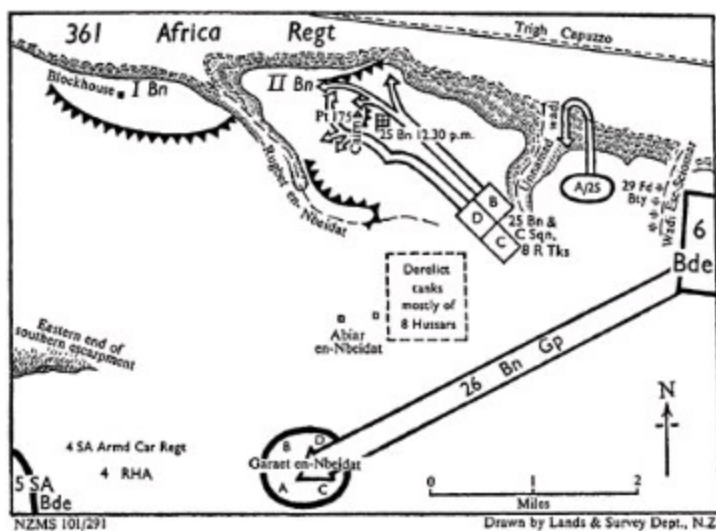
D Company 'just plodded up the slope'¹ at a steadily increasing pace with 17 Platoon on the right, 16 Platoon left, and 18 Platoon in the rear, until muscles ached. At about halfway Major Hastie became suspicious of a tank which he took to be a Valentine, and which moved out to the left flank at a distance of some 700–800 yards, keeping level with Company Headquarters. Some 500 yards from the cairn he noticed that his men were veering left towards the Rugbet and getting farther away from B Company and he ordered a half-right wheel, which caused the sections farthest left to run until lungs were bursting to keep abreast. Soon after this the enemy opened fire with rifles, machine guns and mortars and D Company went to ground. The enemy position was more extensive than the tank commanders realised

and some enemy had lain low even in the area overrun by the tanks and now came to life again. But resistance was short-lived. In a series of short dashes D Company was quickly among the enemy. Most resistance ceased when 16 and 17 Platoons were still some 25 yards away and the Germans rose to their feet and gave themselves up. Lieutenant [Handyside](#)² of 16 Platoon told his men to 'run forward all together and take them prisoner', but in so doing was himself badly wounded in the arm. A burst of fire from the supposed Valentine on the left then killed Second-Lieutenant Holt.³

¹ P. D. Greenlees, 18 Pl.

² Maj M. Handyside, DSO; Hundalee, North Canterbury; born Invercargill, 20 Dec 1918; shepherd; three times wounded.

³ 2 Lt P. de V. Holt; born Ormondville, 19 Apr 1916; farm manager; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.



6 BRIGADE, APPROXIMATELY 1 P.M., 23 NOVEMBER

6 BRIGADE, APPROXIMATELY 1 P.M., 23 NOVEMBER

The prisoners taken here numbered 200 according to Hastie and they were soon grouped together and sent back towards the rear with an escort of three or four men. D Company thought for the moment that the action was over and, according to one man, 'there was a great scramble for the usual loot'. Casualties were not

numerous: three wounded in 17 Platoon, a sergeant killed and two or three besides Handyside wounded in 16 Platoon, Holt's two successors (one after the other) wounded in 18 Platoon, and a company runner and mortar corporal killed or mortally wounded. C Company followed half a mile behind and met little fire until it was well forward, though the platoon on the left, 13 under Second-Lieutenant [Ormond](#),¹ came upon some German posts left behind by the tanks, some of which were quickly overcome by the energetic New Zealanders when the Germans tried to resume opposition. But 13 Platoon swung farther south than D Company and Ormond came upon a detachment of the latter under Corporal [Quin](#),² which had on Quin's initiative stayed to engage 'strong German positions on the left flank'. Ormond suspected a counter-attack was brewing from this quarter and decided to stay also.

¹ [Capt W. E. W. Ormond](#); Havelock North; born [Waipukurau](#), 27 May 1913; sheep farmer; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

² [Cpl I. F. A. Quin](#); born NZ 10 Aug 1910; civil servant; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

McNaught had kept his word and by 12.30 p.m. had his Advanced Headquarters a few hundred yards south-east of the cairn; here the wireless truck and a few more vehicles were soon joined by the ammunition lorries and some of the company transport. He sent Hastie word to dig in where he was and Hastie asked in return for the platoon trucks with tools, which were duly promised. Then McNaught spoke with Major Veale of C Squadron, who thought the infantry were 'pressing on past the objective because the enemy were surrendering in handfuls'¹ and regarded this as a mistake. Veale felt they should consolidate first. The squadron was also rather disorganised and more tanks had been knocked out or damaged than either McNaught or Veale realised. To McNaught, however, the flat top of the feature seemed very open and enemy fire from the front and flanks opened up soon after the prisoners left. He was not quite sure, moreover, that the defended area was in fact his objective and he realised, too, now that he had got forward, that the Rugbet gave valuable cover for any counter-attack the enemy might care to mount. All in all he favoured going on some hundreds of yards and asked Veale to stay a little longer. He sent Hastie a signal accordingly to 'push on as the tanks would only be with us

for another ten minutes'.²

Captain [Heslop](#)³ of C Company reached Hastie just after he received this message. Hastie had already gone some way towards laying out a defensive position and reorganising his men and had the mistaken impression that they had suffered heavy losses. Talking things over with Heslop he agreed that C Company should move through D to carry out McNaught's new order, partly to save time. But Heslop did not realise that Ormond's platoon, less one section, and the whole of 15 Platoon had not stayed with him. McNaught had intercepted Second-Lieutenant [Robertshaw](#)⁴ and sent 15 Platoon with three tanks to fill the gap which had opened up between B and D Companies. Knowing nothing of this, Heslop ordered his men forward and they began to pass through D Company, at which 18 Platoon, not realising what was happening, got up and joined them, carrying on north-westwards for some hundreds of yards.

B Company had meanwhile struck trouble of various kinds and its task turned out to be very different. On the right 10 Platoon under Second-Lieutenant [Cathie](#)⁵ crossed ground that was 'very flat,

¹ Veale's report in the 8 R Tks diary.

² Hastie, report.

³ [Capt W. J. Heslop](#), MBE; born [Christchurch](#), 12 Jul 1910; accountant; wounded Apr 1941; p.w. 23 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Maj P. W. Robertshaw](#), OBE, MC, ED; [Porangahau](#); born [Palmerston North](#), 30 Dec 1911; shepherd; 25 Bn May 1941-Mar 1944; CO 1 Hawke's Bay Regt (Lt-Col) 1953–56.

⁵ [Capt C. H. Cathie](#), MC; [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 26 Jan 1914; commercial traveller; wounded 23 Nov 1941; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; repatriated Sep 1944.

with clumps of salt bush here and there'¹ and came under fire from the clefts in

the escarpment after half a mile. Cathie therefore sent one section along the crest to bring down plunging fire and descended himself with the rest of the platoon to the foot, where a quick bayonet charge overran an encampment of bell tents and yielded twenty prisoners and five dead Germans. A little farther to the west another charge gained thirty more prisoners. The section above, infected with the excitement, then started to come down to the west of Cathie's detachment and was trapped by enemy fire in an exposed re-entrant. Cathie managed to subdue this fire and extricate the section, including three wounded; but in so doing he attracted a good deal of mortar and machine-gun fire and ran short of ammunition. He therefore led his men back up the escarpment and there replenished from the platoon truck. The platoon was not at all daunted by this setback and continued its dual advance above and below the 90-foot-high rampart with undiminished zest, though the terrain with its innumerable irregularities made progress slow in relation to that of the troops advancing across the flat above.

In contrast with the sporadic in-fighting of Cathie's platoon, 11 Platoon on the left, led by Lieutenant [Tredray](#),² after about five minutes came under long-range fire, which grew more and more intense and forced the men down. In widely extended order they carried on in bounds and after some time were joined by a few tanks, which kept level with them and fired their machine guns, though none of the infantry could pick out any sort of target. The section on the left was luckier than the rest, and with one tank in close support took some part in rounding up the enemy in the neighbourhood of the cairn. In this it was soon joined by some of 12 Platoon which was following, and which provided four men to escort the prisoners thus taken to the rear area. The right of 11 Platoon continued north-westwards some distance from the lip of the escarpment and suddenly came under fire from a small party of enemy 'down a siding to our right'³ and lost one killed and two wounded before Cathie's men arrived to take another dozen or more prisoners here.

By this time most of 11 Platoon, without tank support, seems to have passed the top of the feature and was approaching the headquarters area of II Battalion, 361 Africa Regiment, which was strongly defended, though the men of course knew nothing more than that bullets were whistling about them in countless numbers from sources they could not locate. As they went on Tredray, who had led them unflinchingly onwards, was killed and at least six more

¹ Cathie (1950).

² Lt J. P. Tredray; born NZ 27 Oct 1916; stock agent; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³ C. A. Morris (11 Pl).

men were lost. Behind 11 Platoon came Second-Lieutenant [Morris](#) ¹ with 12 Platoon, which alone of the three had been given the revised estimate of enemy strength and was therefore not surprised by the fierceness of the resistance. The men were at first inclined to linger on the ground when they came under fire, but Morris, a young officer in his first action, said, 'I think it's only spent stuff. Get up and walk.' Some 500 yards past the cairn 12 Platoon found itself under fire from three sides, including the rear, and as one private puts it, 'things got very hot'. Ammunition was running low and three tanks ahead were all hit and belching smoke, not a reassuring sight. Morris himself was hit, mortally as it turned out, a Bren-gunner was killed outright, and another private lay dying. A fourth was blinded. There was no sign at all of other troops, either friendly or enemy, though the deadly MG fire continued. Sergeant [Martin](#), ² a burly and still-cheerful figure, now took command and, assessing the position as hopeless, decided to withdraw. By degrees the few survivors came back, the men taking it in turns to provide covering fire while the remainder carried Morris or helped the walking wounded. Despite attention bravely given under fire by a captured medical orderly, Morris died and the survivors of 11 and 12 Platoons tended to fall back towards McNaught's headquarters to escape the fire they had come to expect from several of the wadis. They ended up facing north rather than north-west to meet this menace, stabilising their position as best they could without digging tools on the rocky plateau. A few more men of B Company joined them here and a company lorry braved terrible fire to bring up ammunition.

In the gap between B and D Companies the three Valentines made a good pace across the flat top of the hill and kept any enemy in the area quiet. Continuing northwards, all three were crippled in quick succession near the top of the escarpment, though their crews continued to man their guns. When 15 Platoon, following the I tanks, reached the scene, the men quickly killed the crew of the anti-

tank gun responsible. Then they found themselves threatened by a German tank which came to the top of the slope and, to their immense relief, backed down again. Heavy mortar fire came down on 15 Platoon and an infantry counter-attack from the west was repulsed with difficulty. The platoon commander, Second-Lieutenant Robertshaw, knew nothing of what B Company was doing and felt very isolated. Looking round, as Sergeant Martin did a short distance to the east, he perceived signs of enemy on several sides and could

¹ Lt G. J. B. Morris; born NZ 6 Mar 1912; farmhand; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

² Lt H. R. Martin, DCM; Dannevirke; born Tolaga Bay, 11 Mar 1918; storeman; wounded Sep 1942.

hear the German tank moving just below the crest. There was nothing to be gained by staying and he told his sections to withdraw independently until they regained contact with the rest of the battalion.

This proved a disastrous decision, as the hidden enemy was much closer than Robertshaw thought. As soon as the men rose to their feet they drew terrible fire, which killed or wounded most of them in a matter of seconds. Robertshaw watched this with horror and dismay but could do nothing to help. Taking advantage of the cover offered by one of the disabled tanks (and of the knowledge which the firing revealed of the enemy's whereabouts), he got safely back to B Company. Of the 34 men who had set out with the three tanks 14 were killed, 9 wounded and ultimately safe, and 6 were wounded and captured. The platoon sergeant was the only other man who got back safely that day. Before Robertshaw left, one of the three tanks was hit again by a heavy shell and burst into flames, and he was shocked to see the crew shot down as they tried to make their escape.

Thus 15 Platoon failed to plug the gap between B and D Companies and the B Company action broke up into a series of minor though intense engagements, helped here and there by I tanks which were used up in ones and twos in gallant response to local demands but in a manner quite contrary to all teachings of how these valuable machines should be employed. Captain Fisher,¹ observing for the field

artillery, was well forward in his Bren carrier and doing his best with his four 25-pounders to cover the tanks and infantry from enemy pockets, which were found over a large area and were extremely hard to pinpoint on the ground. The two anti-tank portées supporting B Company, commanded by Lieutenant [Muirhead](#)² and advancing in reverse so that the crews could gain some protection from the gunshields, came under heavy machine-gun fire. The gun K1 nevertheless got well forward and damaged an enemy tank below the escarpment, forcing its crew to evacuate it, and was then put out of action by mortar bombs. McNaught himself was nearby at the time and when Muirhead suggested bringing K2 forward he replied, 'No, you are infantry now! Forward!' But the gunners were soon pinned down by low, intense machine-gun fire, which wounded Muirhead and mortally wounded the gun sergeant. K2 soon after this engaged a tank which came up the escarpment and blew its turret off. But the situation on the right remained fluid and the enemy was able to re-establish or reinforce almost any of

¹ [Maj F. M. Fisher; Cambridge; born Christchurch, 24 Apr 1907; bank clerk.](#)

² [Maj J. C. Muirhead, MC; Palmerston North; born Palmerston North, 5 Oct 1911; clerk; wounded 23 Nov 1941.](#)

his posts in the wadis by bringing fresh troops along the foot of the escarpment, supported by one or two tanks which were a grave menace to B Company. The one portée left could not cover the whole two-mile flank and the Valentines here were all stationary and mostly wrecked.

iii

Men of C and D Companies soon saw for themselves what the German anti-tank guns could do to the heavily armoured I tanks, not only in terms of ugly holes and blazing interiors but in gun barrels bent into odd shapes or in one case shot off altogether, so that the turret looked like a face without a nose. When McNaught ordered Veale to stay another ten minutes the Valentines at hand descended the gentle slope towards the Rugbet and there ran into deadly fire. Six were knocked out

in one group some 300 yards north-west of the cairn, two of them fiery wrecks and the rest badly damaged, while several more were damaged but could withdraw either with useless guns or with wounded or dead members of their crews as passengers. Theirs was a brave but unavailing effort to ease the burden of the infantry and put an end to the stiffening opposition, and when Veale ordered them to rally at 1.10 p.m. only four tanks came back. Of these there was Veale's tank with a 'holed fuel tank', another with a 2-pounder jammed and a gunner wounded, a third with a wounded commander and badly damaged suspension, and the fourth with 'front idler wheel buckled'.¹ Four more were coming back when the infantry on the spot asked for help and it was given despite Veale's order. One of these came back twenty minutes later with one of the crew dead, another badly wounded, and only the driver unscathed. Its thick turret had two clean holes on the gunner's side of a calibre which suggested hits by a 50-millimetre anti-tank gun and the interior was heavily damaged. Another tank came in miraculously free of harm but carrying a sergeant with a broken shoulder from another crew; the crew minus the sergeant went back into action, and before their tank had both tracks shot off their 2-pounder claimed two German tanks.

When elements of C Company and 18 Platoon of D Company resumed their advance on the left they were first mortared and then came under fire from machine guns to their left front which they could not pinpoint, as well as getting showered by splinters from shells bursting low overhead, a type of fire they had not met before. By a natural impulse they tended to wheel left to face this flanking fire, and those on the left were soon halted and forced to

¹ 8 R Tks war diary, report by Maj Veale.

take cover. On the right 18 Platoon went 400 yards or more and 14 Platoon in the centre covered perhaps 200 yards in short dashes in the face of intense fire, so that they all got within a short distance of the eastern edge of the Rugbet, where they were finally halted. Men of 14 Platoon could see Germans to the front on the edge of the wadi, and where this curved round to the left rear more enemy were advancing in short spurts and then going down, getting closer all the time to 13 Platoon and the rest of D Company. The counterattack of which Ormond of 13

Platoon had tried to warn Captain Heslop was clearly under way.

Ormond had meanwhile settled his sections in shallow German slit trenches and sangars to face what was evidently a serious threat. Then he went forward with his runner to reconnoitre. Some 40–50 Germans stood up 150 yards away as if to surrender and he beckoned them over; but they did not come, and when he started over towards them he noticed more lying on the ground and in the background a tank which fired occasionally towards his men. So Ormond returned in haste, his runner getting killed on the way by the tank. The enemy was by this time visible from where 13 Platoon was and Ormond moved from trench to trench to encourage his men, who were running short of ammunition and making what use they could of captured small arms. Ormond himself fired several German rifles and concluded that their former owners had been 'pretty rattled' because their sights were still set at 1200–1400 metres.

Major Hastie was puzzled to know where the fire was coming from and worried because his men had such slight cover, mostly little more than 'a few very shallow holes and clumps of tussock'. He sent a runner to McNaught to explain that he could not move because of heavy fire from the left flank. After this he was talking to a sergeant who came to report that Handyside had been wounded when the sergeant was killed. Then he saw a tank turret rise on the left, and a moment later the whole tank followed by two others which looked like Valentines. Each had a detachment of infantry co-operating closely with it, the tank coming forward a short way and the men dashing up to it in extended line and then going down while the tank made another bound forward. By this careful means the enemy worked his way into the area of 16 Platoon despite spasmodic fire directed at the following infantry from elements of C and D Companies not immediately threatened by the tank guns. A carrier then appeared on the scene, slowly withdrawing before the tanks but losing no chance of firing at the German infantry. It drew much fire and 'fought a good rearguard here' according to Handyside. Private [Gamlin](#)¹ fired one shot from the

¹ Pte [H. B. Gamlin](#); born NZ 22 Apr 1918; farmer; died of wounds 23 Nov 1941.

captured German anti-tank gun and was then shot through the head. The two

portées of K Troop under Second-Lieutenant Ryan,¹ which had followed D Company as Muirhead's had followed B, were at this time occupied with the 'derelict' which had killed Holt, and which they destroyed at a range of no more than 150 yards. But they were shielded from view of the tanks in Hastie's area by the same curve of ground which at first hid the tanks from Hastie; and C and D Companies therefore had no anti-tank support. Two of the three mortars which had followed up the advance had been driven back by small-arms fire and were now stationed near McNaught at Advanced Headquarters, firing as hard as they could in the direction of the Rugbet but unable to observe the results. Their fire, as it happened, caused many casualties in the enemy's rear area but fell nowhere near the force which was overrunning the two companies. The shells of 29 Battery were at this stage falling thickly around the Blockhouse.

With nothing to combat the advancing tanks, C and D Companies had no choice but surrender, a contingency which had never entered the head of any man until he found himself staring at point-blank range at the tank machine guns. One or two here and there gave a last defiant burst of fire and Hastie saw a sergeant of 17 Platoon who 'very coolly got an officer'. Hastie buried his maps and other papers and rose to his feet, noting Heslop doing likewise. Heslop's comment to those around him was, 'Looks like we've had it'.

Thus two companies were lost within an hour of taking their objective and with it a large number of prisoners. It is clear from the accounts of what Quin and Ormond did that the enemy was already strongly posted in the wadi on the left flank when D Company advanced, and prior reconnaissance could have disclosed this important fact. But bad luck also played its part: it was the merest chance that Ryan's two portées were distracted by the 'derelict' to the south at the critical time, and the enemy was lucky in introducing three tanks here without at once meeting these guns or one or more of the Valentines, which were still in the forward area and well able to deal with them.

The men were well treated by their captors, apart from one or two who were wounded, perhaps inadvertently, after they raised their hands, and were soon marched down the gully. No sooner had they gone than shell and mortar fire started to fall in the area, discouraging any exploitation of the German success. The 29th

Battery and the mortar platoon had evidently corrected their sights, and Hastie when he looked back saw the three tanks circling north-westwards and later saw one in flames.

¹ Capt E. L. Ryan; Auckland; born Wellington, 15 Aug 1906; bank officer; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

12

Ryan's section of K Troop at last came into action against two of the tanks, too late to save the two companies but not too late to avenge their capture. The crew of the gun K4 saw what Ryan thought was a light Italian tank followed by what looked like a Valentine 'flying our recognition signals'. K3 and K4 both engaged the light tank and it fired no more, though it kept coming to within 50 yards and then burst into flames. Then Ryan directed K3 on to the 'Valentine' and scored several direct hits in addition to two 'sticky bombs' ¹ lobbed at the tank by the infantry. 'This tank was knocked out', Ryan says, 'but I think the honour should go to the infantry.'

iv

Among the many figures on the bullet-swept slopes of Hill 175 none was more prominent or inspiring than that of McNaught himself, calm and unhurried, pipe in mouth, apparently unconcerned about the fire which came his way. A general counter-attack was evidently in progress and about 2 p.m. he realised from observation and the tales of a few survivors that the two companies had been 'largely overrun'. At about this time Captain McBride ² asked for help for B Company; but McNaught refused it and told him 'to hang on without help.' McNaught used his remaining carriers to 'reinforce threatened points' and got the two mortars nearby to help block what was now a dangerous gap. Then he called up his only reserve, A Company, to reinforce his left.

This company had meanwhile finished its task on the escarpment to the right rear, and when Captain Roberts ³ received McNaught's order he lost no time in coming forward. 'Under terrific mortar and machine gun fire he made his reconnaissance of the enemy position', says Major Burton ⁴ of Headquarters

Company, 'to find the best line of attack.' A crisis had evidently been reached and there was no easy way to overcome it. Speed was essential and Roberts called up 7 Platoon on the right, overlapping into the sector of B Company, and 9 Platoon on the left in their vehicles. They reached Advanced Headquarters, which was in course of being shot to pieces, and debussed under heavy fire. Pushing forward in bounds into a storm of bullets and bursting mortar bombs which claimed many victims, the two platoons got to about 150 yards from enemy positions which produced MG fire in such volumes that further advance would have been suicidal. There 9 Platoon was soon reminded that

¹ Anti-tank grenades which stuck to the armour of a tank and then blasted inwards.

² [Maj F. R. McBride](#); born Ohau, 8 Dec 1909; civil servant; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

³ [Capt W. H. Roberts](#); born England, 3 Feb 1909; civil servant; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Lt-Col H. G. Burton](#), ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Christchurch](#), 1 Dec 1899; company manager; NZ Mtd Rifles 1918–19; CO 25 Bn 23 Nov–5 Dec 1941, Jul–Sep 1942.

it had not replenished ammunition after the skirmish on the escarpment and became desperately short of it. Both platoons veered a little to the right as they advanced to escape the worst of the fire and 9 Platoon now found itself gravely menaced by a tank which was first thought to be derelict—yet another case—but which came to life and tried to run over the infantry (being presumably itself out of ammunition or with jammed guns). K2 of Muirhead's section came up in the nick of time and blew off this tank's turret and the infantry settled down to hold their ground.

By some misfortune 8 Platoon found itself without transport and came forward on foot, meeting murderous small-arms fire which killed four men at the outset and made this advance an unforgettable experience for those who survived. By the time

this platoon reached the front A Company had lost 15–20 men killed and twice that many wounded, and now consisted of little groups out of touch with each other and somewhat bewildered. A Company was now too few and too disorganised to drive the enemy back; but the Germans were rebuked if not repulsed and were no longer venturesome on this part of the front. Lieutenant [Henderson](#)¹ of 7 Platoon gathered together some of his men and some of 9 Platoon (Lieutenant [Jack](#)² having been wounded three times) in a small island of resistance somewhere north-west of the cairn, and Second-Lieutenant [Campbell](#)³ of 8 Platoon likewise collected some thirty men, mostly his own, to the south-east. Sergeant [Winter](#),⁴ who took over from Jack and was soon badly wounded himself, though he stayed in action with five others of 9 Platoon, says:

it was impossible to obtain a coherent appraisal of the situation, a continuous stream of wounded was passing to the rear, enemy fire was intense, and our own 6th Field were putting down a spot barrage that was suicidal in its closeness, captured German vehicles were shuttling up and down between Brigade H.Q., Bn H.Q. and the attached arms. A Company was desperately short of ammunition.... Enemy fire from concealed positions and Tanks decimated the Company before 100 yards had been covered.

Roberts himself had been badly wounded in the leg and lay, like many of his men, with bullets passing inches overhead and no chance of succour until the firing died down.

¹ [Capt B. R. Henderson](#); born England, 8 Nov 1910; commercial traveller; died of injuries 22 Mar 1942.

² [Capt J. R. G. Jack](#); [Tauranga](#); born Onga Onga, 29 Apr 1911; clerk, P & T Dept; wounded 23 Nov 1941; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³ [Capt B. Campbell](#); born Dunedin, 6 May 1916; clerk; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁴ [Sgt T. P. Winter](#); [Lower Hutt](#); born Aust., 9 Jun 1918; salesman; wounded 23 Nov 1941.



Things were no better at Advanced Headquarters, where McNaught had already been twice wounded and the Intelligence and Signals Officers were both badly hurt. Many vehicles, including ammunition lorries, were in flames and it was evident to Major Burton when he came forward at this stage that they had been taken too far forward on the bald plateau and could serve no useful purpose there. At about 2.15 p.m. the wireless truck was destroyed and its crew killed or wounded and Burton sent several other lorries a few hundred yards back. He reported to McNaught and then moved over to the escarpment, where he collected some stragglers and stationed them on the edge to cover the rear of B Company, which was now threatened by a series of minor counter thrusts. Then he sent back word for every able-bodied man of his own company to come forward at once. With these and the few men of 11, 12 and 15 Platoons still in action he formed a two-platoon front facing north, with its foremost posts below the crest.

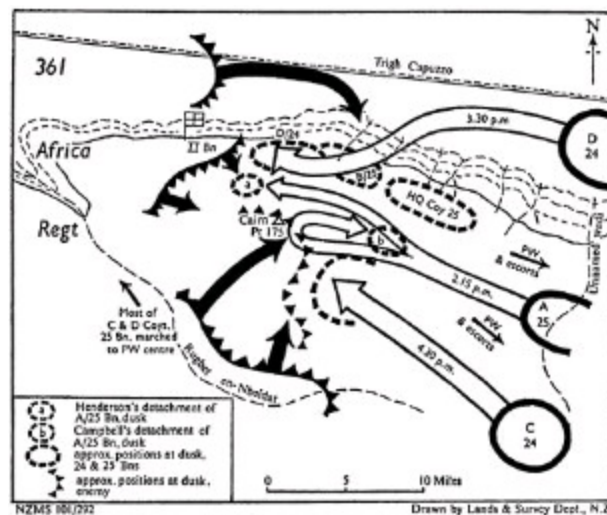
Cathie and 10 Platoon had meanwhile been carrying the fight to the enemy along the escarpment until increasing infiltration with thak support forced them back. A charge down the slope had gained a dozen prisoners, including two or three officers, but two enemy tanks snatched them back from their escorts. One of these tanks was then knocked out by K2 and Cathie's men 'popped off the personnel as they came out of the tank'. When enemy pressure became too great to hold by such tactics, Cathie chose a commanding point on the ridge (getting a bullet through the shoulder in so doing) and disposed 10 Platoon for a last-ditch stand. Two corporals and a medical orderly were killed here, but 'this point simply had to be held', Cathie says, and 10 Platoon kept up fire against all enemy movement below.

McNaught had done his utmost and now had to ask Barrowclough for help. What little was left of Advanced Headquarters was now practically in the front line and McNaught was weakened by loss of blood. Limping badly, he was still an inspiration to those who could see him moving about disdainful of cover, and for some time he personally directed the fire of the two mortars. Wireless was now working only between 29 Battery and its two FOOs and the casualty rate among runners was high. One who did outstanding work was Private [Kinder](#),¹ who carried messages between McNaught and the companies, repairing his own motor-cycle when this was hit and

later making use of a captured motor-cycle until this, too, was put out of action.

¹ WO II J. B. Kinder, MM; England; born NZ 1 Apr 1914; salesman.

When the call for help reached Brigade Headquarters it was only too plain that the battalion was in trouble, and the blazing lorries at McNaught's headquarters with their continual explosions of ammunition served as landmarks and danger signals. Men of 24 Battalion were uneasily aware that their associates of the 25th were not getting all their own way. One officer was very much on edge and said several times to his men, 'We should not wait—we are wanted up there, I am certain they can't get word back.'¹ When Barrowclough committed D Company of the 24th to help the 25th the men were therefore ready and anxious to go. The plateau was obviously swept by enemy fire and the plan was to drive down the unnamed wadi and along the foot of the escarpment to reach a certain point before enemy reported to be advancing from the west could get there. D Company would then mount the slope on foot and hold off this enemy. This was vague and nobody at Brigade Headquarters could give Captain McDonald² of D Company much information.



ATTACK AND COUNTER-ATTACK AT POINT 175, AFTERNOON OF 23 NOVEMBER

ATTACK AND COUNTER-ATTACK AT POINT 175, AFTERNOON OF 23 NOVEMBER

¹ Lt H. Thompson (18 Pl), as reported by Pte E. E. Heyber.

² Capt H. H. McDonald; born Whangarei, 18 Jul 1902; Regular soldier; killed

When D Company of 24 Battalion drove forward to the point indicated the men came under heavy fire as they left their lorries, and like others of the 25th they were none too sure of its source. They could see movement on the crest above and promptly engaged it with their Bren guns. B and HQ Companies of the 25th had had no warning that help was coming and naturally responded to this challenge. Burton, who saw it all, says, 'a hail of bullets whistled overhead and looking over the edge ... we could see khaki forms crawling towards us then one of our guns replied. When the enemy came a little closer we all held our fire for the attackers were ... a portion of a company of the 24 Bn.' Captain McBride managed to get in touch with McDonald and this exchange of fire ceased. The attention of the newcomers was quickly drawn to genuine enemy farther west who deluged the area with mortar bombs from a wadi somewhere north of the cairn. This same wadi also harboured a tank, which threatened the survivors of B Company and which soon provided the gun K2 with its third victim this afternoon. Backing up to the edge, the 2-pounder fired from its portée and at short range blew off the turret. This broke the back of the enemy's resistance here and 16 Platoon of D Company crossed the wadi, which was strewn with wounded and dead of both sides, and pushed on along the rocky slopes against what turned out to be a very strong enemy counter-thrust supported by murderous fire. A private of 16 Platoon ¹ describes it thus:

Pte [Mottram](#) ² ... made his way to the edge of the escarpment. The noise was terrific. He passed a knocked out Spandau and crew and moved over the edge, joining Pte [Morgan](#) ³ and others who were down among the rocks. They were caught by fire. Mottram gave one last burst of fire from his Tommy gun before turning back, then was killed. Morgan was wounded while making his way back ... D Coy was held down by fire.

McDonald then 'stood up to size up the position' ⁴ and was himself shot down, together with his batman. To lose 'Happy Mac' at the outset was a heavy blow; it served if anything to stiffen the resolution of D Company but robbed it for a brief but critical period of the initiative McDonald would undoubtedly have supplied.

McDonald's death coincided with a thrust above the ridge by the four I tanks

which Major Veale had managed to rally and make battle-worthy, and which drove the enemy there right back beyond the three Valentines which 15 Platoon of the 25th had followed to their doom on the escarpment north of the cairn. The tank commanders expected the infantry to follow and hold the recaptured

¹ W. R. A. Shakespear.

² Pte B. Mottram; born NZ 7 Mar 1919; millhand; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

³ Cpl G. M. Morgan; Whangarei; born NZ 24 Feb 1917; labourer; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

⁴ Shakespear.

ground and were disappointed when none did. To B Company of the 25th, not knowing of the death of McDonald or of the fierce fire still coming up at D Company, it seemed a pity and the unit report says that 'no advance was gained' from the tank thrust and 'no advance was made by 24 NZ Bn, under cover of the tanks'. Veale gained the impression that the infantry had no ammunition; but this could not apply to the newly-arrived D Company, nor does it emerge from accounts of B Company at this stage. McNaught himself came over and ordered 12 Platoon to 'attack again', according to Private Reed. ¹ 'Went over to our right to the edge of the escarpment', he adds, 'and attacked up there'. This cost four more lives, and in another skirmish soon afterwards McBride was wounded. Then McNaught was hit a third time. Reed saw him 'bowl over, get up and shortly go down again'.

The shortage of officers in B Company was now acute and Sergeant Martin rose splendidly to the occasion, directing a series of local thrusts and helping to turn the tide of German aggression. Barrowclough had also committed the four Vickers guns of 9 MG Platoon, and two of these came across from McNaught's headquarters and were stationed on the escarpment by the time D Company came forward, though too close to the enemy to be effective at first. Their guns were far too conspicuous to set up at what was no more than Tommy-gun range of the Germans. It was not until the

situation became a little more stable that these two guns went into action on the plateau to their left front and the reassuring clatter of their fire, steady and persistent, did much to strengthen this front. The other two guns of 9 MG Platoon were much troubled by accurate and close-range fire, and by first one tank (duly knocked out by K Troop) and then another which passed within a few yards, and they could not get into action as 'the very least movement brought down a hail of fire'.²

When he was hit the third time McNaught was on the point of going over to inspect the left flank, which had again come adrift; but he was taken instead to Brigade Headquarters and there saw Brigadier Barrowclough, who at once arranged to send up another company of 24 Battalion and also Lieutenant-Colonel Shuttleworth to take over command. By a great feat of willpower McNaught mustered his ebbing physical powers long enough to go back and brief Shuttleworth when he arrived, which he did 'rather incoherently' as he says. Then he was taken back to the dressing station and withdrew from the action.

¹ Sgt A. G. Reed; Palmerston North; born Palmerston North, 8 Jan 1917; clerk; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

² Pte G. G. Beckingham, quoted in Kay, 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, p. 133.

vi

The second company of reinforcements, C Company of the 24th under [Captain Tomlinson](#),¹ was sent up with the vague instructions to 'assist 25 Bn as they directed'. Tomlinson waited until his men were moving off in their lorries and then went on ahead to Advanced Headquarters of the 25th, which was now a collection of broken-down lorries with no sign of order or purpose. All Tomlinson could find were a few signallers 'who were packing up and getting out'. He could get no more information than his own eyes told him and this was misleading: 25 Battalion seemed to him to be 'badly demoralised and disorganised and their men were streaming off Point 175 hotly pursued by the enemy.' This must have been at about 4.30 p.m. and probably coincided with a fresh attempt by the enemy to dislodge the

few handfuls of A Company of the 25th still fighting on the left flank. Tomlinson quickly summed things up and decided that he should stage a company attack, 'hoping that the sight of fresh troops would help 25 Bn to reorganise and establish a line'.²

He therefore met his men on their way forward, sent the troopcarrying vehicles back, and told the platoon commanders to attack towards the cairn but not to incur heavy casualties; if this seemed likely they were to go to ground and hold on to give 25 Battalion time to reorganise. This was not a prescription for driving back the enemy and C Company halted some 300 yards short of the cairn, which the enemy now held strongly. But Tomlinson's men showed themselves resolute in defence and repulsed a quick counter-attack. By about 5 p.m. the situation seemed stable and the left flank secure. Tomlinson was out of touch with the right flank and did his best to rally elements of 25 Battalion and extend his line northwards in the hope of making contact with D Company, which he was told had been 'pretty badly mauled'. In this he succeeded, and perhaps half an hour later he reported back that C and D Companies now formed a line with some of 25 Battalion between them and he thought it would hold in the meantime, though it had no depth if heavily attacked. Advanced Headquarters of 24 Battalion then arrived on the scene and Shuttleworth himself conferred with Tomlinson, deciding to leave things as they were until after dark, when he would bring up his other two companies to form a reserve. Digging tools were now brought forward and C Company made use of them wherever it could to strengthen its posts, extending this work after dark to the more exposed positions.

¹ Maj E. K. Tomlinson, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Ashburton, 6 Sep 1909; bank clerk; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

² Letter, 13 May 1951.

Shuttleworth's first concern was to get his own D Company (now under the command of Captain Jones¹) firmly established and he did much to encourage the men. Though there was much evidence of enemy above and below the escarpment, firing gradually died down and Button and Shuttleworth were able to talk things

over. Shuttleworth left Burton in command of the 25th and began to redispense D Company, not on the slopes where it had done most of its fighting but on the plateau above. He personally sited section posts quite close to the enemy, who sounded very near after dark and sent up the usual abundance of flares. Later in the night the enemy withdrew. On the Trigh Capuzzo enemy transport was noisily active. At the same time Burton reorganised his men to the right rear into a composite company. Some men of Headquarters Company were used here to reinforce B Company, which at a roll call after dark numbered only two officers and 36 other ranks—about the strength of each of the three platoons when they set out at noon for Point 175.

Rather less than half of Hill 175 remained in New Zealand hands, though more than two-thirds had been seized in the early stages with the invaluable help of the I tanks, so the enemy had regained a good deal of ground, including the cairn at the highest level of the feature. But neither side had enough troops forward to build up a firm front, and on the left in particular the demarcation between the two was vague and no-man's land an uncertain area in which carrying parties impartially attended friend and foe among the wounded. In at least one case Germans directed New Zealand wounded back to Tomlinson's lines. The ground to the north of the cairn was thickly strewn with wounded of both sides, some of them already suffering pitifully from exposure in the cold desert night. Even the men of 24 and 25 Battalions who were still in action had no greatcoats or blankets and were chilled to the bone, and Burton, seeing this, went back and got his men blankets and a hot stew. C Company of the 24th worked ceaselessly throughout the night bringing in wounded and taking them back to the rear, where the RAP of 25 Battalion overflowed with stretcher cases. But those who advanced farthest on the left before being hit almost all ended up in German hands. The paradox of tender care for the wounded regardless of nationality following the relentless fighting which caused their suffering was never more apparent than in the stretch of desert north of the cairn, where a wounded man bearing as best he could his lonely agonies had about an equal chance of being lifted up by German or New Zealand hands and all were treated with

¹ [Capt B. T. J. Jones](#), m.i.d.; born [Dargaville](#), 16 Aug 1904; advertising manager; p.w. 28 Nov 1941; died on active service 17 May 1945.

equal compassion. Thus in 15 Platoon of the 25th nine wounded ended up at their own RAP (where a German medical officer worked alongside 'Doc' [McCarthy](#),¹ Padre Willis² and others until all were 'almost to the point of collapsing'³) and six reached a German dressing station. Even in this work of mercy, however, fate clashed with logic: Captain Roberts of A Company, whose driver had driven boldly forward to pick him up, was mortally wounded by mistake on the way back, his last words being, 'Tough luck, being hit by your own chaps.' This was a rare case, however, and the darkness was used in general to save lives and repair as much as possible the damage to flesh and bone which was the inevitable outcome of an attack pressed resolutely against stubborn defences, developing into thrust and counter-thrust until both sides had had about as much as they could stand.

vii

The bare details available do little to illuminate this hard-fought action from the enemy's point of view, but the diary of [21 Panzer Division](#) refers to 'repeated attacks by enemy tanks from the south and east along the Trigh Capuzzo' and goes on to say that 361 Africa Regiment 'had particularly hard fighting, and its most easterly battalion had severe losses'. Neither this division nor Suemmermann's (both of which thought by some misunderstanding that 361 Regiment was under their command) identified this action as being chiefly against New Zealanders, and both seem to have regarded it as some sort of offshoot of the main battle against the British armour. Reports of the advance of 4 New Zealand Brigade (not identified as such) towards [Gambut](#) were followed by others which suggested that this force had somehow turned south and had run up against [Africa Corps](#). Then at 8 p.m. Major Ryll of II Battalion, 361 Regiment, came back wounded and reported that eight British tanks had been knocked out on his front, which was rather less than the truth. But it is interesting to note that a patrol from 2 MG Battalion of 200 Regiment passed right through the regimental area in the early hours of the morning and did not meet any members of 361 Regiment until it got nearly to the [Via Balbia](#). More interesting still, Suemmermann sent forward during the night a subaltern of this regiment, who failed to find any of his colleagues and reported next morning that the area was 'completely deserted and in disorder as if it had been plundered'. He found 'numerous dead and tank tracks' in the area. Suemmermann was baffled and

¹ Maj L. C. McCarthy, MC; Wanganui; born NZ 30 Dec 1911; medical practitioner.

² Rev. C. E. Willis; England; born England, 29 Jun 1907; Anglican minister; wounded and p.w. Nov 1941.

³ Pte H. R. Mackenzie.

sent sapper patrols next afternoon to [Sidi Rezegh](#) to make contact with 361 Regiment, thinking that Colonel Grund may have withdrawn westwards along the escarpment.

This is all mystifying, as Shuttleworth found enemy well established next morning in the area of the cairn (though he dislodged them with surprising ease). The only explanation that seems to fit the case is that Grund, having committed a good deal of his I Battalion as well as the whole of II Battalion in defence of Point 175 and lost heavily in both units, withdrew all he had left during the night and reorganised in the Blockhouse area, leaving 175 to infantry of [Africa Corps](#) who came up from the south (and who were withdrawn at short notice next day for Rommel's dash to the frontier). Point 175 is frequently mentioned in reports of 15 Infantry Brigade as the objective of the afternoon attack against the South Africans, and it is at least possible that some of either 115 Regiment or 200 Regiment ended up there after dark. One step the enemy took during the night was to lay anti-tank minefields in various areas, including that occupied by the six disabled Valentines on the western slopes of the hill.

At all events 361 Africa Regiment lost heavily and was badly disorganised by Barrowclough's attack; but casualties seem to have been about the same on each side. The 270 German prisoners sent back to the rear were more than twice the 100-odd of C and D Companies of the 25th who were captured (to say nothing of 80-odd wounded Germans brought in); but sixteen British tanks, mostly Valentines, were lost against a total of no more than eight assorted enemy tanks put out of action. In killed and wounded 6 Brigade probably lost more than 361 Regiment. Whether General Suemmermann accepted the latter after this action as 'good Germans' is not recorded; but they surely earned by their stout defence at least this recognition. The

New Zealanders found them worthy opponents, as brave as any they met.

No New Zealand battalion in the Second World War lost more men killed in a single action than the 100 or thereabouts that the 25th lost between noon and dusk of this Sunday of the Dead. ¹ The wounded who were not captured numbered well over 100 and total casualties in the battalion were more than 350, some two-thirds of those who actually took part in the attack. Officer casualties were heavy, 16 out of 27 who set out for Point 175, including Cathie, who stayed in action despite his shoulder wound. In its brief action. D Company of the 24th lost 27 men, including eight killed, and C Company lost rather fewer. C Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), which battled bravely this day and saved both battalions from losing

¹ Of the prisoners, 11 died when the Jantzen was torpedoed on 9 Dec.

many more than they did, ended up with 25 killed, wounded and missing, a high total for such a sub-unit, and had only two Valentines fit for action, a crippling loss. In 9 Platoon of 3 MG Company 11 men were killed or missing and several more wounded and safe, also a high rate of loss, though none of the four Vickers guns was lost. The total in 6 Brigade amounted to 420 men or more, severe losses by any standard and particularly so against defences which had virtually no field artillery support and very little mortar ammunition.

viii

The 'bag' of 350-odd German prisoners in this attack was increased by another fifty taken by Major [Sawyers](#), ¹ OC of 48 Battery, from salvage parties working in the huge park of derelicts to the southwest of Brigade Headquarters. When he found out that enemy were still among the tanks, chiefly Stuarts of [8 Hussars](#), he called down fire from his own D Troop and then attacked with his small OP party in such determined fashion that the Germans quickly surrendered. The Brigade LAD officer, Second-Lieutenant [Cooper](#), ² took several of his mechanics and drivers and, covered by the Brigade Defence Platoon, began work to recover these tanks. The party was shelled and two men wounded; but by the end of the day at least nine Stuarts were brought into the brigade area.

The other troop (C) of 48 Battery opened fire in the late afternoon on five or six enemy tanks which approached from the east and sent them scuttling away. Then another group of tanks and what looked like lorried infantry was seen driving up from the south and Brigade Headquarters was alerted; but this enemy disappeared in a fold of the ground and was not seen again. Both were doubtless some stragglers from the main battle against the South Africans; but they served to distract the attention of 48 Battery at a time when its fire might have been very useful to the troops on Point 175. Then a third group of tanks caused anxious moments as it came on towards 24 Battalion just before dusk; but since they were flying the correct pennants they were given the benefit of the doubt, and they turned out to be twelve Stuarts which had run out of ammunition and were nearly out of petrol. (They stayed the night and were still there when 6 Brigade moved on next morning.)

These were minor concerns; but they added to Barrowclough's already immense burdens, and when he got warning from 30 Corps at 7.10 p.m. that he should consolidate and be prepared to repel tank attack next day he was worried about the large number of

¹ [Lt-Col C. H. Sawyers](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born Aust., 17 Feb 1905; sales manager; CO 14 Lt AA Regt Dec 1943; CO 5 Fd Regt 15 Aug-12 Oct 1944; 30 Nov 1944–1 May 1945.

² [Lt T. L. Cooper](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 29 Oct 1905; workshops manager; wounded 25 Nov 1941; died 24 Sep 1959.

lorries in the brigade area, particularly those of 6 RMT Company which were not likely to be needed for the next day or two but which greatly enlarged the perimeter to be defended. The growing congestion of wounded men at the 25 Battalion RAP and at an ADS opened near Esc-Sciomar by 6 Field Ambulance also demanded attention. He therefore decided to send some of the lorries back towards the frontier with those of the wounded who were fit to travel this way, while the rest of 6 RMT Company moved south to the 30 Corps transport area. McNaught undertook with Lieutenant [Ollivier](#) ¹ to navigate the column of wounded and this set off before dawn on the 24th, after a busy night of preparation. Besides these matters there was acute anxiety about the supply of food, water, petrol and, above all, of ammunition.

The Brigade Supply Column which had been specially formed to serve 6 Brigade in its detached role had not yet arrived and there was no knowing when it would turn up.

By 11 p.m. Barrowclough laid his plans for the next day, expecting to have to hold his ground against tank attack probably from the south-west. He was determined to yield none of the ground then held by Shuttleworth and so had no choice but to close up from the east towards Point 175. In its present form the brigade group straggled for some miles along the plateau above the escarpment. Just before first light on the 24th he meant to move up the rest of 24 Battalion to reinforce Shuttleworth, who was to hold what he now possessed, while Page would hold the southern flank to link up with Shuttleworth's force and the eastern flank at about [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#), the northern flank along the top of the escarpment being taken over by 8 Field Company to link up with 25 Battalion and complete the 'box'. The nine Stuarts handed over to Veale would from outside Page's position strengthen the south-western face in an anti-tank role. Other less mobile tanks would operate from within the brigade perimeter. The rest of the anti-tank defences were left to 6 Field Regiment, 33 Anti-Tank Battery, and 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery. A signal to this effect was sent to Shuttleworth at 11.15 p.m. and in it he was authorised to use one day's reserve of rations and water, in the hope that further supplies would arrive in the morning. There was a possibility, inferred from a message which came in soon after 1 a.m. on 24 November, that British armour might cover the southern flank; but Barrowclough did not attach much weight to it. The message read as follows:

Information received confirms most unlikely ARMSTRONG (OC SA BDE) still holding out. GOTT responsible deny enemy area between you and BRINK (S.A.'s remainder at GOBI).

¹ [Maj F. M. Ollivier](#); [Lower Hutt](#); born NZ 11 Jan 1916; student; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

This was evidently from 30 Corps; but it was too vague to justify weakening the southern flank in favour of any other. Later in the morning Barrowclough also heard that he was no longer under 30 Corps but under the New Zealand Division, which

was small consolation in view of the uncertainty of communications with either. He felt he was for most practical purposes still isolated and left to his own resources.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 12 – THE MATRUH STAKES

CHAPTER 12

The Matruh Stakes

i

HELP was closer than Barrowclough thought. When Divisional Headquarters Group settled for the night near Bir el Chleta it was less than eight miles away, with two infantry battalions and, not far behind them, another squadron of **8 Royal Tanks**, while 4 Brigade with two more I-tank squadrons was five miles farther away in the **Gambut** area. The blanket of interference which made wireless almost useless at night, however, affected all formations and G Branch could not get through at all to 6 Brigade and not even to 4 Brigade until 2 a.m. on the 24th, though a message was received from much farther afield to say that 5 South African Brigade was now under the Division's command. Even wireless could not keep pace with events.

This signal was sent from 13 Corps at 9.38 p.m. on the 23rd. Another from 30 Corps to **1 South African Division** at 10.27 told Brink to get in touch with Brigadier Armstrong as soon as possible; it pointed out that Gott would try to do the same and that, further, Armstrong would come under command of 13 Corps. The battered British armour would rise, phoenix-like, from the desert to deny the enemy the use of the ground on which he had asserted his superiority, and next day 30 Corps would reconnoitre 'with a view to counter-attacking later'. Brink was to use mobile troops as a back-stop against light enemy forces venturing some distance south of the previous day's battleground, and he was encouraged to form a strongpoint at Taieb el-Esem on the Trigh el-Abd. This last was the only substantial suggestion, and after pointing out that 5 South African Brigade had virtually ceased to exist, Brink ordered Pienaar to move a few miles south-east at dawn and set up **1 South African Brigade** in all-round defence of Taieb el-Esem, which in due course he did without trouble.

This might indicate that 30 Corps somehow remained hopeful of a favourable outcome to the present troubles. But Corps Headquarters had no clear reports of the fighting, and in particular had no idea of the size of the enemy armoured force involved. On the assumption that the German tank units had sunk to somewhere near the low level of strength of the British armour it was possible to remain hopeful. At a conference at 12.15 p.m. on the 23rd this assumption had been made with

reservations, and Norrie's GSO II, Major Carver (in R/T contact with Norrie), and Godwin-Austen discussed with Brigadier Galloway ways and means of bringing 13 Corps into the battle to relieve [Tobruk](#) in accordance with Cunningham's intentions. These were that the changeover of command of the infantry in the forward area should take place on 24 November by arrangement between the two corps commanders, and that 30 Corps should 'continue the destruction of enemy armoured forces' ¹ and at the same time help 13 Corps and protect its L of C as they extended towards [Tobruk](#). Another question which the corps commanders and the BGS Eighth Army considered was how much weight the [Tobruk](#) garrison could throw into the struggle, and on this Norrie was cautious. He was asked 'to decide whether he could break off the battle or stabilise on the line Point 175 (438404)—Bir el Gubi'; but he made no decision on this and affirmed to Godwin-Austen that he was 'perfectly able to deal with the situation for the rest of the day in the event of an enemy counter-attack'. ² This was presumably at the time when Gott was convinced that the morning's operations by the panzer forces were the first step of a general withdrawal by them. Godwin-Austen was shortly afterwards in direct R/T contact with Norrie and got the impression that he was in no way down-hearted, but that 13 Corps would certainly be needed in full force to break through to [Tobruk](#).

Somewhere in these discussions there emerged the alarming possibility that Eighth Army might have to break off the whole offensive, but neither Norrie nor Godwin-Austen would hear of this, the latter especially, since his corps had scarcely started fighting and, so far as he knew, his strong force of I tanks was still largely intact. (He had yet to learn of the loss of almost three squadrons at the Omars and Point 175.) But he could not fail to recognise that 30 Corps was gravely weakened and could no longer bear anything like the burden allotted to it in the crusader plan.

General Cunningham was evidently needed in person in the forward area to resolve these problems and dispel the obscurities which had crept into the discussions; but after he got back from seeing Godwin-Austen in the morning the news which came in was blacker than ever and he took the grave step of asking Auchinleck to fly up and see him at once. On current estimates the enemy had 100 tanks left, half of them Italian, and 30 Corps rather fewer tanks which now seemed inferior to those of the Germans. Perhaps Cunningham hoped that Auchinleck, when he saw for himself how

¹ UK narrative.

² Ibid.

serious the situation was, might somehow be able to hasten reinforcements. But when Auchinleck arrived in the evening with Air Marshal Tedder things were worse still. News had come in of the crippling of 4 Armoured Brigade the night before and first rumours of what had happened to the South Africans in the afternoon of the 23rd.

If the British armour had indeed failed as badly as these reports suggested, Cunningham could not see how he could carry on trying to destroy the enemy armour, because at the present rate of loss the time was not far off when he would have no tanks left at all. This raised the possibility not only of the defeat of Eighth Army but also of the invasion of Egypt. He had begun to see that the tempo of operations and the boldness of the German conceptions were beyond anything the British commanders could cope with. The British armoured brigades were quite outmatched in their fighting capabilities by the panzer divisions and there seemed nothing for it but to try to stand on the defensive on a line perhaps between [Gambut](#) and [Gabr Saleh](#) or on the frontier.

But Auchinleck found it hard to adjust his outlook to the sudden change from glowing reports of success to the present gloomy forecasts of disaster. He insisted that the offensive must go on, whatever the cost and even to the sacrifice of the very last British tank. His spirit was magnificent and greatly impressed Galloway and others who saw him at this time. With this encouragement the Eighth Army Commander therefore issued an order at 10.30 p.m. to both corps which was attuned to Auchinleck's attitude, and which was in its essentials utterly impractical unless some drastic change in the general situation took place. Godwin-Austen was to take command of all troops concerned with relieving [Tobruk](#) and was to 'recapture' [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Ed Duda](#) [sic] and exploit towards [El Adem](#), with whatever air support was needed. Norrie was to carry on as before with his efforts to destroy the enemy armour, but with the added commitments that he would have to guard both the New Zealand and South African divisions against tank attack and also

be ready to meet a tank attack from Bir el-Gubi against his left flank and rear. 'Tk strengths indicated should make comfortable allowance for this without prejudice to main role of armoured forces which is to destroy enemy tks', the order concluded, with remarkable disregard of the plain facts of the case. Cunningham could not possibly have believed that in its present state the British armour was able to take on more and more commitments on top of that which had already proved beyond its ability, the destruction of the enemy armour. The odds had already swung against 30 Corps and this order could only increase them. But it also set in motion the complicated rearrangements required to free 5 and 11 Indian Infantry Brigades from their present tasks and make them available for mobile operations perhaps a week hence, a move which was to operate very much to the advantage of Cunningham's successor.

Auchinleck says in his despatch that Cunningham received his decision to carry on the offensive 'loyally' and 'at once issued his orders to give effect to it'; but the truth was that neither had any constructive ideas as to how the situation might be retrieved, and their determination to push the New Zealand Division westwards to the area then dominated by the undefeated enemy armour in the full knowledge that 30 Corps was powerless to intervene effectively was courting further disaster. That this did not in the event come about was not their doing but Rommel's. They could not predict the striking change in the general situation which Rommel was on the point of bringing about in defiance of his advisers and to his ultimate and serious disadvantage.

The Middle East Commander-in-Chief went on to consider carefully the chances that some such change in the situation might arise and put his opinion on paper next morning in the form of an order to General Cunningham. 'I realise also that should, as a result of our continued offensive, the enemy be left with a superiority of fast moving tanks', he wrote, 'there is a risk that he may try to outflank our advanced formations in the [SIDI REZEGH- GAMBUT](#) area and cut them off from their bases in EGYPT. On the other hand, it is clear to me that after the fighting of the last few days, it is most improbable that the enemy will be able to stage any major advance for some time to come.' Like others on the British side he seriously misjudged enemy intentions and abilities, and though he was clear enough that the offensive should be pressed 'with every means in our power' he could provide only minor suggestions as

to how Cunningham might carry out this task other than the broad assignment to 'join hands with the [Tobruk](#) garrison', an object nevertheless still secondary to that of destroying the enemy tank forces. If the enemy turned his attentions from the defeated South African brigade to any other troops trying to get through to [Tobruk](#), then Eighth Army would have no chance of success. Infantry could not attack panzer divisions and so all talk of recapturing [Sidi Rezegh](#) was pointless unless the enemy unexpectedly looked elsewhere, as Auchinleck thought him most unlikely to do. In this same order, written while Cunningham was visiting Norrie, the Eighth Army Commander was also told to direct Force E of the Oases Group 'at the earliest possible moment' ¹ to stop all traffic on the coast road

¹ Underlined by Auchinleck.

and, if possible, capture Ajedabia or [Benina](#), to use the [Long Range Desert Group](#) ¹ to disrupt communications wherever it could in the enemy's rear, and to commit all available armoured cars for this and similar offensive purposes. But none of these measures promised any immediate easing of the crisis.

ii

What Godwin-Austen proposed in detail in the order of 9.38 p.m. to [Freyberg](#) rested on the belief that, on the 24th, 30 Corps would be holding a seven-mile front running south by west from a point on the Trigh el-Abd 12 miles south of Ed Duda. He wanted the New Zealand Division to extend this line to Ed Duda. Then the [Tobruk](#) garrison would surge forward to Ed Duda and thereby complete a front extending in a huge arc for nearly 30 miles from the original perimeter of the fortress. But 13 Corps had yet to learn that Armstrong's brigade had been deleted from the order of battle, and Colonel Gentry signalled in reply at 2 a.m. on the 24th asking 'Do you know where 5 SA Bde is now?' Gentry also on [Freyberg's](#) behalf wanted to see Godwin-Austen or a representative during the day and suggested he should be escorted 'as small parties of enemy tks and guns are about'. Godwin-Austen had meanwhile put his thoughts on paper for [Freyberg's](#) benefit in a personal letter which arrived late on the 24th.

PERSONAL. BY HAND OF AN OFFICER.

My Dear [Freyberg](#),

I have just returned from 30 Corps who are in a bad way. Briefly it seems that the enemy still had at 1100 hrs today, at least 100 German Tanks in being, plus an unknown number of ARIETE. With them they were repeatedly attacking our forces South of SIDI REZEGH. Our own losses have been extremely heavy and though it may be pessimistic to say so, it may well be that we have less tanks (excluding 'I' Tanks) running than the enemy.

An order was issued by Army to the effect that you and your troops were temporarily under command of 30 Corps. This was done with the intention of ensuring that any task on which they were employed in conjunction with troops of 1 SA Div was co-ordinated. This, NORRIE assured me, would NOT work. It is cancelled and all troops coming into the area North of the 390 Grid line will be under your command and you under mine.

There is no necessity whatever, I'm sure you will agree, to become disheartened over the situation of our 30 Corps. We will meet and destroy the enemy tanks with our guns and 'I' tanks. I am absolutely determined to relieve [TOBRUK](#) when we shall automatically get at least 40 more 'I' Tanks.

¹ Designed for gaining information rather than scalps.

The sortie having made quite good progress with the capture of over 2,000 prisoners was halted owing to the check to our 30 Corps. I do not consider it has the reasonable chance of success we should offer it until we are ourselves firmly established on the ED DUDA position. I would ask you to let me know instantly when you are so disposed, using the code word curate.

I heard the question of withdrawal mentioned today but refuse to consider it while our prospects on the whole are so rosy by comparison with the enemy's whose mobile German forces are so small and of whom we have already

garnered so much. Suffice it to say that like anyone of sense I have an outline plan in my mind for execution should the question arise. Its main features are that any withdrawal would be by our existing axis and that I would keep what we have gained by standing on the general line [MENASTIR](#) - 5040 - Pt 217 502388 - Pt 201 497367 - [BIR BU DEHEUA](#) 490364 - LIBYAN SHEFERZEN 495359.

It is good to feel that you and yours are with me in a situation of this kind.

With many many thanks for all you have already done.

4 Ind Div have been asked to send up all 'I' Tanks they can spare and the remaining Bty 8 Fd Regt.

Yours very sincerely,

Godwin-Austen.

The spirit of this was, like Auchinleck's, admirable; but the 13 Corps Commander was in effect asking [Freyberg](#) to undertake with only two infantry brigades what the whole of 30 Corps had failed to do. [Freyberg](#) might have to fight his way through two panzer divisions and a German infantry division, as well as various Italian formations and perhaps Ariete too. And he would have to start fighting not with the concentrated strength of 1 Army Tank Brigade but with whatever I tanks he had at hand. He could not hope to succeed in this mission unless the remaining British armour gave all possible help, and this called for a fundamental change of policy to put the relief of [Tobruk](#) as the main object of Eighth Army, a step which neither Cunningham nor Auchinleck would take. Unless the enemy armour obligingly absented itself (as unpredictably it did) [Freyberg](#) would have no real chance of success, and there was no reason to suppose that his infantry brigades would serve any other purpose than to be sacrificed like the South Africans to overwhelming panzer counter-attack. None could therefore quarrel with Godwin-Austen when he spared a thought for possible retreat. But even with a firm order rather than a request from Corps, [Freyberg](#) could not count on I-tank reinforcements from 4 Indian Division, nor (as Godwin-Austen elsewhere suggested) could he draw all his needs from [Tobruk](#) once he made firm contact. The crusader plan had not provided for this and the garrison was already, because of the prolonged break-out battle, facing a

crisis in the supply of 25-pounder ammunition.

A revealing statement of the position as seen from the British side comes from a meeting at about 10 a.m. on the 24th between Godwin-Austen, Galloway, Carver (in R/T contact as before with Norrie) and Brigadier Griffin (DA & QMG, 30 Corps), at which Galloway came right out with the information that Cunningham was seriously thinking of 'calling off' the whole offensive' and thereby 'horrified' Godwin-Austen. The latter 'spoke to Norrie who told me that XXX Corps was as good as "finished" '. Then Galloway asked him if 13 Corps could relieve [Tobruk](#) and he replied 'No! but [Freyberg](#) will'. Godwin-Austen impressed on Galloway that the offensive must at all costs continue and the BGS returned to Cunningham's headquarters 'a very much happier man'. ¹ But it is interesting to note that Cunningham when he saw Norrie in person a little later made no mention of retreat.

iii

The future of Eighth Army depended less on its own leaders than on what went on in General Rommel's mind as he toured the battleground south of [Sidi Rezegh](#) after dark on the 23rd by the light of blazing lorries and tanks and saw evidence all around of overwhelming victory. He already had another good reason to congratulate himself. A very strongly worded request this day to Comando Supremo in Rome to be given direct command of the Italian 20 Mobile Corps was immediately granted and left him free to issue orders and not merely requests to General Gambara, a privilege of which he was not slow to avail himself. He could now use Ariete Armoured and Trieste Motorised Divisions however he pleased to exploit the day's success. The extent of this success was no matter for careful calculation: it seemed complete and he was led to believe that not only the whole of the South African division but all the remaining British armour, including the Support Group, had been shattered, and with their defeat all likelihood vanished of a link-up with the [Tobruk](#) garrison. He had won the battle of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and certainly did not feel like waiting for the final balance sheet before taking his next step. 'When he came back to [El Adem](#) that night he was in a state of excited exultation', his Intelligence staff officer says, 'and at once began to issue orders which changed the whole character of the Crusader battle'. ²

With the [Tobruk](#) front cleared up except for the bulge south-eastwards from the original perimeter, which was now likely to be a source of weakness rather than strength for the garrison, Rommel felt he could turn his attention elsewhere. A signal this afternoon

¹ Letter from Historical Section Records, Cabinet Office, [London](#), 28 Sep 1950, reporting Godwin-Austen's comments on the NZ narrative.

² Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles, 1939–1945*, p. 73.

from General de Giorgis, in conjunction with other scraps of information about the doings of the British in the frontier area, had played on Rommel's mind. Recent fighting had taken place much farther away from this line than he ever intended when the line was established and brought home to him that his situation as a whole was weaker than in the long autumn months it had appeared. If the frontier line collapsed, moreover, he would have to give up all hope of capturing [Tobruk](#) for a long time to come, and even the rigours of the fighting at [Sidi Rezegh](#) had not yet persuaded him to do this. As the Panzer Group Battle Report says,

The essential result achieved on 23 November was the removal of the immediate threat to the forces investing [Tobruk](#). The important thing to do now was to destroy the remainder of the enemy (elements of 7 Armoured Division) in the bag south of [Sidi Rezegh](#), and afterwards to advance as quickly as possible to relieve the Sollum Front.

This was what Gause and Westphal at Panzer Group Headquarters thought, and Cruewell too. But Rommel disagreed, though he acted without consulting them, so that this difference of opinion did not immediately come to light. From his headquarters at [El Adem](#) he put out the orders Mellenthin mentions, the first to 3 Reconnaissance Unit at 11.15 p.m. stating that next day 'some elements of troops' would 'advance towards [Sidi Omar](#)' and that the unit was to keep the [Via Balbia](#) open and reconnoitre in force to 'the far side of [Bardia](#) and [Capuzzo](#)', a task which in fact meant passing right through the New Zealand Division. The next was to Fliegerfuebrer Afrika:

Own spearhead will advance tomorrow morning from area south-west of [Tobruk](#) in direction of Gasr el Abid - [Sidi Omar](#)

Air reconnaissance in force and fighter sweeps astride Trigh el Abd east of El Gubi is requested.

Thus by 11.48 p.m. he had already decided to take a considerable force along the Trigh el-Abd to [Sidi Omar](#); and there is no reason to doubt that in so doing he meant, as the Battle Report says, to re-establish the frontier line. About midnight he sent off his usual daily report to Rome and [Berlin](#) saying that next day he meant to complete the destruction of 7 Armoured Division and 'advance with elements of forces towards [Sidi Omar](#) with a view to attacking enemy on Sollum Front.'

The first report of the day's fighting from [Africa Corps](#) had been sent at 6.15 p.m. and said enough to confirm the impression Rommel gained with his own eyes:

Corps attack successful. Large enemy force destroyed. Forward line [Sidi Rezegh](#) airfield. Details of the situation not yet clear. Large number of PW, much material and many guns and tanks captured. Because he had lost most of his wireless sets Cruewell had to send this by way of 21 Panzer; but it no doubt reached Rommel in good time. Rommel set out for Cruewell's headquarters at midnight but did not find it and ended up at [15 Panzer Division](#), which was at that time, 4 a.m., out of touch with Cruewell. Rommel therefore assumed direct command of the Corps for the time being and told Neumann-Silkow that '15 Pz Div will detach an advance guard under Lt Col Cramer to push SE towards [Sidi Omar](#) and hit the enemy as he withdraws.' Neumann-Silkow had already planned to reorganise his forces next day and salvage the huge amount of equipment which now lay at his disposal; he had ordered his 33 Reconnaissance Unit to cover this activity and follow up the retreating British remnants from the previous day's fighting. If the view 15 Panzer took of this fighting was correct there could not possibly be any sizable British forces left in the area:

23 November, 6 p.m.: Darkness fell. In this terrific engagement well over 2000 PW had been taken, over 100 tanks destroyed, and countless trucks, guns and SP guns captured or destroyed. 1 South African Div, with its attached tanks and A Tk, had been completely wiped out. ¹

Before leaving his own headquarters Rommel had had a brief talk with Westphal, in the course of which the latter pointed out that fresh British forces were 'coming up from the east'² and got Rommel to consider attacking these at once with [Africa Corps](#); Westphal was not in favour of taking the Corps so far away from the [Tobruk](#) front and Rommel when he departed, taking General Gause with him and leaving Westphal in charge at [El Adem](#), promised that he would be back by the next evening or the morning of the 25th at the latest. Lieutenant-Colonel Bayerlein, Chief of Staff of [Africa Corps](#) at the time, says that Rommel 'still meant to take [Tobruk](#) but could not do so while he himself was still being attacked',³ and this seems very likely. Certainly it was entirely in character. Rommel was not the man to relinquish easily his burning ambition of many a long month. Bayerlein's view finds some support in an order General Boettcher issued this day, which read in part that 'Tobruk Fortress will be attacked and captured at a time to be decided.'

Cruewell had in the meantime reached von Ravenstein's battle headquarters and the news there was most reassuring: 5 Panzer Regiment had glowing reports of the battle and had suffered a smaller proportionate loss than had the formations of [15 Panzer Division](#). Also Cruewell learned that Rommel proposed to meet the CO of 8 MG Battalion, among others, at Kilometre 13 on the

¹ 15 PZ Div war diary.

² Kriebel.

³ Young, [Rommel](#), p. 110

Tobruk By-pass road at 6 a.m., and he decided to go there himself. He had made up his mind what remained to be done: to pursue the defeated enemy between the Trigh el-Abd and the Trigh Capuzzo and destroy them; to salvage the 'vast stocks of captured material so that the enemy could have no chance of recapturing them'; and to attack the forces advancing westwards along the [Via Balbia](#) and Trigh Capuzzo.¹

At the conference on the By-pass road Cruewell reported in this sense, stating

that the battle just finished had resulted in 'the destruction of the greater part of 1 SA Div and 7 Armd Div. 120 guns, many A Tk guns and trucks, and 80 tanks had been captured, and about 5000 PW. Some of the enemy had escaped south towards Gabr Saleh. Our losses were also heavy, particularly in the panzer regiments.'² The full extent of the tank losses, however, had yet to be explored and this item attracted less attention than the preceding statements. Rommel's orders, given out after hearing this, allotted 155 Infantry and 361 Africa Regiments the task of salvaging the captured equipment and motorising their units with it. [Africa Corps](#) (and not merely elements of it) had to mount an 'Attack on [Sidi Omar](#) to relieve the Sollum Front'.

If he was going to get back the same day or the following morning Rommel had to set off at the earliest possible moment and he urged all concerned to move as soon as they could. But the aftermath of the battle was by no means all joyous exuberance, and the intermingling of units in the final stages and the dislocation of services could not be rectified in a moment. For one thing all wireless transmitters in 15 Panzer had been lost in the course of the action and replacements were urgently needed. For another, 6 New Zealand Brigade and Divisional Headquarters Group at Esc-Sciomar and Bir el Chleta respectively were reported by 33 Reconnaissance Unit as 'large enemy columns at Sciafsciuf advancing west' and light British forces were thought to be south-east of 15 Panzer, so that the divisional staff had already begun to deploy 15 Infantry Brigade on the right and 8 Panzer Regiment on the left, facing east and south-east with supporting artillery, and had arranged for much-needed ammunition and petrol to be brought forward to replenish both formations. There was more evidence of British strength in the neighbourhood than Cruewell bargained for. The men's nerves may also have been still on edge from the tremendous struggle of the previous afternoon, because at 7.12 a.m. 33 Reconnaissance Unit reported as a heavy attack what was no more than light shellfire

¹ The 'Appreciation' in the DAK diary identifies these troops as NZ Div; but this is certainly an afterthought.

² DAK diary. The estimate of prisoners was greatly exaggerated.

from 47 NZ Field Battery; after brushing against B Squadron of [11 Hussars](#) and a few New Zealand anti-tank guns it withdrew westwards. As a result of all this 15 Panzer was far from ready for the proposed move, and the sorting out of units and sub-units not only took up much time but disclosed that casualties had been far greater than at first appeared. Perhaps for this reason Cruewell ordered 21 Panzer to take the lead, followed by 15 Panzer, and he understood that the whole of Gambarara's Mobile Corps would follow to the right rear.

The task Cruewell specified was to 'pursue the enemy' and this was enlarged in the order of 15 Panzer to include the route ('via [Sidi Rezegh](#), Gabr Saleh and the Trigh el Abd to Gasr el Abid'). The object was now stated to be to trap 'the enemy force attacking the [Sollum](#) front', however, and there is much to suggest that this rather than pursuit was the fundamental purpose of the move.

There are various post facto versions of what Rommel really intended by this sudden move, but pursuit and the trapping of British forces supposed to be encircling the frontier line are the only motives which appear in contemporary documents. His quarter-master-general says he meant to capture the British supply dumps and by cutting off supplies force the British to break off the action; but he scarcely concerned himself with this ¹ and it would have conflicted in any case with his stated intention of getting back to the [Tobruk](#) front within twenty-four hours. The pace and unexpectedness of the move, however, were no doubt meant to have a psychological impact on an enemy who had already suffered a crushing defeat.

But the exorbitant demands Rommel made on his troops in order to achieve the degree of surprise he desired had by no means a favourable influence on the minds of his own men, who had already served him wonderfully well; and he was assuming, reasonably but wrongly, that the British would at once recognise the scope and power of the advance. Had the two panzer divisions moved off to schedule and had Ariete and [Trieste](#) done likewise this might well have been the case. The resultant mass of armour and mobile infantry racing along the Trigh el-Abd might have put an end to any hopes Cunningham and Auchinleck had of maintaining the offensive. But no such assembly of might took place and the ever-lengthening and thinning column which resulted from Rommel's urgings to von Ravenstein at the head of it to increase his pace made the arrival at the frontier look much less

impressive than it might have appeared. It was the 18th of November in reverse, with the British this time refusing to take the enemy move seriously enough.

¹ Another *sommernachtstraum* was certainly not what he had in mind.

The defeat the British suffered the previous afternoon was complete enough so far as it went; but it did not go as far as the Germans thought, and it cost far more than Rommel realised. The tank strength of [Africa Corps](#) was in two or three hours almost halved, and in particular 15 Panzer, which had escaped serious loss in the fighting thus far and had entered the fray on the morning of the 23rd with 116 tanks, now had just over sixty and had lost heavily in all units of 15 Infantry Brigade, particularly those of 115 Regiment. From a first-class fighting formation, Neumann-Silkow's division was drastically reduced in strength by its reckless advance against the South Africans. Von Ravenstein had had only a small complement of infantry to start with and had suffered considerable loss in the earlier fighting; now his tank regiment was reduced from 57 tanks to about 40 and his division was down to below a third of its proper strength. The battle had cost the Germans more than seventy tanks and Cruewell might well have echoed the words of Pyrrhus about such costly victories.

Thus the corps on which Rommel's hopes mainly rested was now a blunter weapon than he thought, and the excessive haste of his dash to the frontier was to make it blunter still. This was a time to husband resources and ensure that the advantage gained in the [Sidi Rezegh](#) battle was turned to good account, as Cruewell, Westphal and others recommended. But Rommel staked everything on shock tactics to end all resistance. In so doing he put to flight British troops in his line of advance, but he puzzled rather than panicked the remainder and left the two New Zealand brigades free to operate against the siege troops outside [Tobruk](#) without interference from [Africa Corps](#). In so doing Rommel threw away the victory won by the skill and bravery of his panzer troops and granted Eighth Army a priceless reprieve.

'You have the chance of ending this campaign tonight!', Rommel told von Ravenstein when he gave him his orders; 21 Panzer was to drive through the frontier 'looking neither to right nor left' ¹ and then wheel northwards towards [Sollum](#). 'The

enemy has been beaten and is withdrawing SE', 5 Panzer Regiment was told, and Lieutenant-Colonel Stephan was to lead the advance followed by anti-tank and heavy artillery, with 104 Infantry Regiment bringing up the rear with the supply columns. Orders for Stephan to move off were supposed to come from [Divisional Headquarters](#); but before he reported he was ready Rommel turned up in person about 10.30 a.m. and told him to start at once, which he did though his battle group was 'not completely assembled'. Rommel himself led the way and the [Africa Corps](#) war diary commented with a hint of

¹ Young, pp. 110–11.

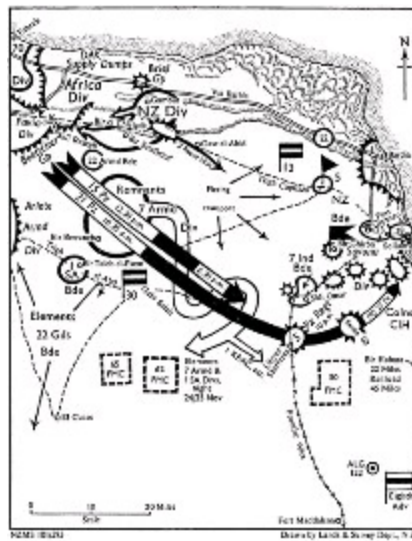
malice, 'Speed of move increasing all the time.' The pace was in fact quite remarkable. When Barrowclough hurried westwards two days before his speed of eight miles in the hour was thought in some quarters excessive: this morning 21 Panzer averaged 13 miles an hour for nearly 30 miles to Gabr Saleh and reached there before 1 p.m. British forces seemed to be following on both flanks, and at 11.30 a.m. Stephan came under light shellfire and a few minutes later fired on 'large enemy columns withdrawing SE at high speed in front of the regiment'. By 2.50 p.m. twenty-five tanks to the left front, with some field guns and anti-tank support, succeeded in halting 5 Panzer Regiment, and since the German artillery and anti-tank guns had been outdistanced by the headlong advance of the panzers, the latter had to fight as best they could without support and with ammunition in many cases unreplenished. But Rommel would brook no delay and led the rest of the division south of this position until it 'disappeared over the skyline'. ¹

Neumann-Silkow had meanwhile strained every resource to get moving along an axis six or seven miles east of that followed by 21 Panzer, which meant threading his way from the [Sidi Rezegh](#) airfield through the rear columns of the neighbouring division. Information which came in about Eighth Army was most confusing and two reports, one from Savona and the other from 3 Reconnaissance Unit, were jumbled together to read as follows: 'On the Sollum Front a unit of heavy British tanks had broken through towards [Bir Ghirba](#) and was advancing west along the Trigh Capuzzo and the [Via Balbia](#).' ² Then 33 Reconnaissance Unit at 10.35 a.m. reported 21 NZ Battalion and the battered remnants of 22 Armoured Brigade farther south as enemy

'moving SE and swinging ESE, covered by tanks, armoured cars and artillery' while 350 vehicles remained at Bir Sciafsciuf. Who these were and where they came from were puzzles Neumann-Silkow had no time to solve. It was 12.30 before 15 Panzer moved off, with 8 Panzer Regiment and the troop of '88s' leading and 15 Infantry Brigade to the right rear. By this time 21 Panzer was 'in great depth', as Neumann-Silkow's diary euphemistically describes it, the front and rear being more than 20 miles apart. At the best possible speed 15 Panzer could do no better than overtake a few supply detachments of von Ravenstein's and the heads of the two divisions were by 3 p.m. farther apart than ever, one at Bir Berraneb and the other nearly 30 miles away at [Bir Gibni](#), though 5 Panzer Regiment was still tied to Gabr Saleh and out of touch with Divisional Headquarters.

¹ Battle report of 5 Pz Regt.

² 15 Pz Div war diary.



ROMMEL'S DASH TO THE FRONTIER, 24 NOVEMBER

Stephan's own tank had been disabled by anti-tank fire, several other tanks were hit, ammunition was dwindling fast, and by 6 p.m. 5 Panzer Regiment was using up its last drops of petrol and could do no more than camp for the night where it was, having suffered 'very heavy casualties'. ¹ To cap its misfortunes it learned later that its supply lorries had followed on behind the rest of the division and

crossed into Egypt, under Rommel's personal directions, though

¹ Battle report of 5 Pz Regt.

a few lorries did turn up at 7.25 p.m. With this help and a redistribution of resources Stephan was able to move off again at 9 p.m., but an hour later he ran into a small party Brigadier Davy had gathered around him west of Libyan Sheferzen and there was a sharp clash, ¹ the British withdrew, and Stephan halted at Gasr el Abid, where he was glad to settle down for the night. At 2 a.m. he reported that he had twenty fit tanks left and 5 Panzer Regiment was well on the way to dissolution. Von Ravenstein had meanwhile gone through the Wire, where Rommel left him, and ended up south of [Halfaya](#) after a most exciting journey, though only a few detachments of the division had managed to keep up with him and the rest were widely scattered. [Africa Corps](#) Headquarters numbered only a very few vehicles and these got through to the frontier without check. There Rommel and Cruewell conferred at 5 p.m.

From scraps of information gathered on the way and his own earnest thinking on the subject, Rommel had now decided what to do. Before leaving in the morning he had given verbal orders for Ariete to make for Gabr Saleh and for [Trieste](#) to vacate [Bir Hacheim](#) and head for [El Adem](#) (where Westphal would presumably send it on eastwards behind Ariete). These divisions extending eastwards would link up with [Africa Corps](#) to form a line along the Trigh el-Abd to Sherferzen, and from there to [Halfaya](#), to block the escape of a British force which he imagined was closely investing his own frontier line on both sides. Then the two panzer divisions would drive this enemy on to the deep minefields 'and compel him to surrender' ² Meanwhile 33 Reconnaissance Unit, which was in even worse condition than 5 Panzer Regiment and now had no armoured cars left, would push on to the escarpment at Bir Habata and block the descent there 'for withdrawal or replenishment' of the forces he meant to destroy. With 4 Indian Division south of the frontier line and the New Zealand Division to the north of it thus knocked out with swift blows, the campaign would be finished and Rommel could give his full attention once more to [Tobruk](#).

Cruewell thought the main enemy here would be found north-west of the

frontier line and wanted 21 Panzer to attack [Capuzzo](#) by way of Upper Sollum while 15 Panzer attacked from the south, a scheme which would have gravely threatened 5 New Zealand Brigade; but Rommel rejected it. Neither realised that an Indian brigade was ensconced inside the defences of Omar Nuovo, and

¹ Davv, pp. 177–9.

² DAK war diary.

Rommel's decision this night was that both panzer divisions should attack northwards at 6.30 next morning. Then Rommel, Gause and Cruewell found themselves trapped on the frontier south of Gasr el Abid 'in the middle of enemy columns and gun positions' ¹ and they could not get clear until daybreak.

The order reached 15 Panzer 15 miles south-east of [Sidi Omar](#) and Neumann-Silkow planned to despatch 8 Panzer Regiment at 5 a.m., with 200 Regiment following, to form up south of the Omars and attack northwards at the specified time, while 115 Regiment dug in facing north and covered by anti-tank mines along the Trigh el-Abd to [Bir Gibni](#) to form a blocking position against any British troops fleeing southwards as the panzer threat developed, a task Ariete would take over when it arrived. But 33 Reconnaissance Unit could not go on to Bir Habata, 'as it had neither ammunition nor petrol'. ²

iv

By looking to the north-east Rommel turned his back on far more tempting prizes and beguiled himself with what Kriebel called in retrospect an evil dream. But the full reward of his enterprise was also denied by the lingering misapprehensions in Eighth Army about his remaining armoured strength. It was impossible to rate the dash to the frontier at its full value if the German tank states had fallen as low as was believed, and this belief proved remarkably durable. A careful collation of the many reports on the subject might have confirmed the scope and power of the move; but since Norrie's headquarters was swept away in the flood of retreating vehicles and Cunningham's gravely threatened, no such calm staff work was

possible. Reports of small details were therefore taken as whole panoramas and the impression gained ground at Army Headquarters and 13 Corps that the enemy was making his 'last and final effort'³—enough to justify quick steps to dodge inquisitive panzers in the rear areas but not enough to make any major alteration to current policy.

The two panzer divisions had formed up just beyond the horizon of the New Zealanders on Point 175, and to 24 Battalion on the left their 'grey trucks seemed to pass in an unending stream' three miles to the south.⁴ Both 4 and 22 Armoured Brigades had been ordered to 'protect the left flank of NZ DIV',⁵ but the former had gone some miles south to replenish, and [Africa Corps](#) in racing

¹ DAK war diary.

² Ibid.

³ UK narrative.

⁴ Shakespear (D Coy).

⁵ UK narrative.

through the 14-mile gap between these two brigades kept them apart for the rest of the day. The torrent of enemy tanks, guns and lorries flowed on to the Trigh el-Abd east of 1 South African Brigade and left it undisturbed at Taieb el-Esem, though it swept away most of Pienaar's B Echelons and carried before it Brink's headquarters despite plucky opposition from a handful of 2-pounders and Bofors. The 22nd Armoured Brigade stood firm, but with only fifteen tanks left Brigadier Scott-Cockburn could do little and Pienaar could do no more than get his field regiment and one battery of 7 Medium Regiment, RA, to pound the enemy columns as they went by. The gunners worked hard but could see little result of their efforts and the total effect was disappointing. The rest of 30 Corps was swept aside or put to flight. For detached transport and non-fighting units this became a wild race,

generally known as the 'Matruh Stakes', to outdistance the panzers, and in some shamefaced cases the race developed into the 'Garawla Stakes', [Garawla](#) being east of [Matruh](#).

Cunningham himself only narrowly escaped this ignominy when he called on Norrie in the morning. Norrie had already received first reports of the enemy move when the Army Commander arrived, and while the two were talking shells started to fall south of them. Fleeing lorries drove madly across the landing ground as Cunningham's [Blenheim](#) took off, and Brigadier [Clifton](#)¹ who had escorted him there watched with his heart in his mouth. But even his aerial vantage point did not disclose to Cunningham the massive nature of the enemy operation and talk at Corps Headquarters had been of 'three or four Panzer columns',² suggesting nuisance raids but no serious threat. It was on this understanding that various fighting elements of 30 Corps imposed what delay they could on any enemy they met. In this way 4 Armoured Brigade claimed to have set on fire many vehicles and perhaps helped Davy's mixed detachment to hold up 5 Panzer Regiment and knock out some of its tanks. At 65 FMC, the most northerly of the supply depots of 30 Corps, there were moments of acute anxiety as the enemy swept through the outskirts; but camouflage and dispersion of the vast stocks there deceived the enemy and he passed on unaware of the prize which was there for the taking. The Support Group and remnants of [7 Armoured Brigade](#) had retreated along the Trigh el-Abd and reached the frontier by 2.30 p.m.; but Norrie later recalled them to help defend 62 FMC, and after dark they drove

¹ [Brig G. H. Clifton](#), DSO and 2 bars, MC, m.i.d.; [Porangahau](#); born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1919–21 (MC, Waziristan); BM 5 Bde 1940; CRE NZ Div 1940–41; Chief Engineer 30 Corps, 1941–42; comd 6 Bde Feb–Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped, [Germany](#), Mar 1945; Commander, Northern Military District, 1952–53.

² Clifton, pp. 131–3.

south-westwards over desert studded with enemy detachments and lit by their flares, reaching their destination at 1.30 a.m. on the 24th. Gott was already there

with what he retained of his head-quarters and 4 Armoured Brigade in search of petrol and ammunition ended up 18 miles to the north, with 22 Armoured Brigade in semi-isolation on the far side of the enemy columns and 20 miles north of Gatehouse. Some of Norrie's headquarters were carried along on the crest of the wave almost to [Halfaya](#), where a few elements were captured, and others passed right through the frontier line and joined 13 Corps Headquarters at Bir el-Hariga. Norrie himself was worried about the FMCs south of the Trigh el-Abd, which he regarded as the probable enemy objective, and assembled all the strength he could in their defence, including 22 Guards Brigade. No counter measures were possible until the various pieces were sorted out and reassembled; but Gott ordered his three armoured-car regiments to reconnoitre next morning up to the Trigh el-Abd from [Sheferzen](#) to Bir el-Gubi.

▼

Godwin-Austen's headquarters near Bir el-Hariga was not directly threatened by the enemy move and could take a more balanced view of it. The first impression was that the enemy had undertaken a 'wide encircling move from south of [El Adem](#), with the intention of destroying the British forces in the area south of [Sidi Rezegh](#)' and had committed for this purpose a maximum of sixty tanks. Then Ariete was thought to be threatening the supply dumps of 30 Corps. Planning to link up with [Tobruk](#) nevertheless went on and 70 Division was told to be ready to continue its sortie by 26 November if the operations of the New Zealand Division went well; if they did not then the garrison might be called to make an earlier effort as a diversion. [Freyberg](#) was to press on regardless of the situation elsewhere, and when he felt able Messervy was to relieve 5 New Zealand Brigade.

Messervy's first task was to tidy up the position at the Omars and 4/16 Punjab fought all morning to overcome resistance in a large pocket in the northern half of the Libyan Omar strongpoint. By 2 p.m. on the 24th this was cleared and many more prisoners taken; a small but extremely stubborn pocket in the west was all that now remained and this showed no signs of weakening. As it contained the '88s' which had done most of the damage to the I tanks in the original attack and most of 12 German Oasis Company, which had formed the backbone of the defence of the whole position, it had to be left for a later date. In the meantime it was a constant

source of annoyance, as was the artillery in the Ghot Adhidiba strongpoint ('Cova').

These local troubles were dwarfed, as the day advanced, by the menace of the onrushing panzers, on which wireless interception of 30 Corps signals gave a running commentary soon confirmed by the front runners in the Matruh Stakes. Hundreds of lorries of all sorts raced through the area of 4 Indian Divisional Headquarters at Bir Sheferzen 'in a great cloud of dust', ¹ and when part of 30 Corps Headquarters drove through an artillery commander was told with tactful understatement that 'owing to the German tank advance, soft-skinned vehicles were being withdrawn.'² There was no indication that the culprits were more than 'some Axis tanks'; but this was reason enough to take steps to protect divisional headquarters and the nearby 50 FMC. The German vanguard crossed the frontier before any action could be taken and was on its way to [Halfaya](#) by the time the few Matildas of 42 Royal Tanks and all available anti-tank and Bofors guns were sent to cover gaps in the Wire. There was still no suggestion that more than a raiding party was involved, and Messervy therefore ordered the [Central India Horse](#) and 31 Field Regiment, RA, to move out during the night to tackle any enemy east of the frontier next day and defend the FMC. In the night also Messervy's Advanced Headquarters moved into the comparative safety of Libyan Omar. 'Night fell on a scene of confusion;' Dobree says, 'but darkness, strangely enough, threw light upon the situation.' Enemy flares 'began to soar on all sides' and to those at Bir Sheferzen 'it was apparent that the Germans practically surrounded them'.³ By a strange trick of fate three most important German Army officers, Rommel, Cruewell and Gause, were close at hand and in similar peril.

Aircraft of both sides operated this day chiefly in fighter sweeps, but with little effect because the situation on the ground was in a state of flux and friend and foe were in many cases intermingled. Me100s were the only German fighters with range enough to operate in the frontier area and the [RAF](#) claimed five of them for the loss of three Hurricanes. As German tanks got closer and one ALG⁴ came under shellfire, the five foremost landing grounds had to be evacuated in great haste; but for most fighters it was too late to fly to the rear base and a total of 175 aircraft assembled in acute congestion on LG 122, ten miles from [Maddalena](#) and only 20 miles from the nearest enemy. Panzers had in fact passed within ten miles. Local anti-aircraft guns might be able to hold off German tanks for a time; but there was little to stop the Germans, if they chose, from shelling to destruction the bulk of the [RAF](#) fighters in

the desert as one target of rare opportunity.

¹ Bharucha, *The North African Campaigns, 1940–43* (Indian official history), p. 240.

² Dobree, 'On the Libyan Border', *Royal Artillery Commemoration Book, 1939–1945*, p. 191.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Advanced landing ground.

This unique offering and the FMCs of both British corps were among the prizes Rommel rejected when he gave his main attention to the [Sollum](#) front. Eighth Army Headquarters was also at his mercy in the [Maddalena](#) area and began packing up to move if necessary. But these opportunities were fleeting. Besides Norrie's and Messervy's steps to protect their FMCs, other measures were put in hand to guard the Railhead area and all anti-aircraft guns there and around [Maddalena](#) and the ALGs were to concentrate on ground targets.

Cunningham flew north to see Godwin-Austen in the afternoon, landing at [Sidi Azeiz](#) at 2.30 p.m. and leaving two hours later, but failing to perceive on the return journey that the enemy spearhead had already crossed the frontier. He was not unduly worried by the new turn of events and in this was encouraged greatly by his commander-in-chief, who maintained a calm confidence which had a profound impact on those around him (as Norrie did this day south of Gabr Saleh). Auchinleck refused to accept the enemy move as anything more than a 'desperate effort' which he was sure would 'not get very far' and would soon outrun its supplies. ¹ It nevertheless flatly contradicted his assurance this morning to Cunningham that the enemy would almost certainly not be able 'to stage any major advance for some time to come'. If Cunningham betrayed some anxiety for the safety of Egypt it was not without warrant; but both he and Auchinleck were inclined to minimise the immediate danger and an Eighth Army report to [Cairo](#) at 8.45 p.m. described the current panzer movements as 'Probably only raids'. Both confirmed Godwin-Austen's

view that the New Zealand Division should press on towards [Tobruk](#) regardless of events elsewhere. Yet [Freyberg's](#) L of C could not be kept open as things were and his division could not carry on for long without supplies. For all his admirable demeanour Auchinleck had, like Cunningham, no really constructive suggestions as to how to carry on the battle and everything now depended on how Rommel conducted his frontier operations. He had enough strength at hand, though Eighth Army refused to believe this, to compound the confusion in 30 Corps and Army Headquarters and force a general withdrawal behind the frontier, leaving the New Zealand Division isolated and starved of supplies. But Rommel's judgment was in this case even worse than that of his opponents and he gave them three priceless days in which to retrieve their blunders and rebuild their strength while he squandered his own.

¹ [Eve Curie](#), *Journey among Warriors*, p. 52.

vi

Nobody had more reason than Brigadier Barrowclough to rejoice at the new developments, though he was only vaguely aware of them. He had strained every resource to be ready for a tank onslaught of the kind which had overwhelmed the South Africans the day before, and realised with immense gratitude some hours later that this danger had for the time being passed. It was a great relief, too, to be rid of many of the wounded and most of the empty RMT lorries which had cluttered his area, and he had no idea of the wild adventures to which he had committed them.

Major [Hood](#)¹ of 6 RMT Company had had to canvass during the night battalion commanders whose whereabouts he could only guess to get them to release their troop-carrying lorries, and in so doing narrowly escaped disaster on an enemy minefield. B Section, which carried 25 Battalion, was almost hopelessly mixed up in the unnamed wadi with other transport and guns and quite unready to move, and C Section with 26 Battalion was also hard to disentangle. The whole area was now under shellfire and another detachment of his lorries drove into the unnamed wadi loaded with prisoners who had not been fed and who complained about being held under fire. Only A Section with 24 Battalion was readily extricated, and Hood told it

to pick up wounded at the ADS and form up behind Company Headquarters. But the brigade staff intervened in Hood's absence and sent this section off southwards; Hood got back in time to see it disappear over the horizon. Four more lorries were needed for wounded and he supplied them. A little later he moved off himself with the bulk of the company, the staff captain's words ringing in his ears: 'For God's sake get rations, ammunition, water and fourthly petrol as soon as you can get it up.'

The wounded carried by A Section under Sergeant [Baird](#)² had a terrible journey. The lorries had barely reached their first staging point, a South African dressing station some 15 miles south of 6 Brigade, when 21 Panzer swept through with machine guns at first blazing away in ignorance of the nature of the establishment. Then the Germans let part of the group through: three ambulance cars and some nine lorries with McNaught in charge and several Germans among the wounded. Other German tanks, however, came upon the scene, scattering the rest of the RMT lorries and driving them ahead at a breathless and bone-shaking pace, imposing an ordeal on the wounded, lying mostly on the flat steel trays, to match anything they had yet endured. The drivers whenever they gained

¹ [Maj A. G. Hood](#), ED; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 29 May 1912; company manager; OC 6 RMT Coy Oct 1941-Feb 1942; Asst Director Supply and Transport, Army HQ (in NZ), 1942–46.

² [S-Sgt J. D. Baird](#), m.i.d.; [Nelson](#); born NZ 10 Jun 1916; fruit and produce merchant.

a respite from pursuit and enemy fire did what they could to ease the suffering of their passengers, roping down those lucky enough to have stretchers and laying out camouflage nets and blankets for others to lie on. But the speed of the move increased as they approached the frontier, and the jolting and jarring when lorries traversed tufted scrubland at 40 miles per hour filled every moment with torment for men who already suffered agony enough. 'I can see Ron [Burden](#)¹ with his two hands full of hair that he had pulled out, so great was his pain', a private of 10 Platoon, 25 Battalion, writes.² Most of this detachment spent the night at a South African CCS; but next day brought them no relief from the horrors of this hunt and well inside Egypt they were still chased by German tanks.

In the main body of 6 RMT Company under Major Hood the most unlucky were the prisoners packed under the canopies and aware of the violent and painful commotion but not of its cause. Hood, as he was ordered, made due south for the B Echelon area of 30 Corps, and had gone nearly 20 miles and then halted. Then he came under shellfire and was told by a Support Group officer to 'get out as an armoured column was only two miles away.' One driver carried on oblivious of it all until he saw that his canopy had been set on fire. Soon the desert was full of vehicles racing madly away and Hood saw one column to his right rear under enemy fire. By careful zigzags which gained for his lorries all the cover the ground offered, he got close to the frontier wire soon after 4 p.m. and there came upon Rear Headquarters of 30 Corps. Hood was told to report in person and was about to do so. when the whole mass of vehicles suddenly moved off in great haste. He had no choice but to follow. Sixteen empty lorries of the Divisional Petrol Company under Sergeant Plumtree³ which had also got caught up in the race had meanwhile joined Hood's group, and all drove through the Wire somewhere south of Sheferzen. On the Egyptian side Second-Lieutenant Pool⁴ again came upon part of the same headquarters of 30 Corps but found the officers he met there 'were in a worse panic than we were and all they could tell me was to go East'. Vehicles of all kinds and sources became attached as Hood drove on, and he swung north to pull clear of the cumbersome field in the Matruh Stakes, ending up about 9 p.m. not far short of the enemy at Ghot Adhidiba. The artillery officer of 4 Indian Division

¹ Pte R. O. Burden; Pukemiro, Auckland; born Palmerston North, 9 May 1921; deer culler; wounded 24 Nov 1941.

² B. H. Robb.

³ Capt D. R. Plumtree, MM; Auckland; born NZ 20 Mar 1915; garage attendant.

⁴ Lt-Col J. Pool, m.i.d.; Te Kopuru, North Auckland; born England, 12 Jun 1904; credit manager; LO with SHAEF in Europe 1944–45; LO with British Army staff, Paris, 1945–46.

who halted the group there advised Hood to bed down for the night and promised to get him instructions by the morning. Hood was worried about getting supplies back to 6 Brigade and he still had on his hands the bulk of the prisoners he had set out with. The lorries carrying these were parked in one block, the guards doubled by making use of spare drivers, and the prisoners counted. They numbered 280, all German, and like the drivers were much shaken by their experiences and very hungry.

Similar adventures befell most New Zealanders who on 24 November tried to supply the various units of the Division or went back for more ammunition, water, rations or petrol. The careful provisions of the crusader plan for maintaining these services had already been gravely strained when [Freyberg](#) took two brigades westwards instead of one. Under the impact of Rommel's dash to the frontier the whole maintenance organisation was shattered. 'Extended & unprotected L of C is bringing its difficulties', the A & Q diarist wrote this day with masterly restraint. [Rear Divisional Headquarters](#) and Administration Group had moved to [Abiar Nza Ferigh](#) south-west of [Sidi Azeiz](#), a calm desert island in a turbulent sea. The diarist was worried at first because 5 Brigade badly wanted to engage a field artillery target 'behind [HALFAYA](#)' but could not get enough ammunition. Then he was concerned for the safety of his own Group and thought of asking for permission to move inside Hargest's perimeter at [Sidi Azeiz](#), which would have been a fatal move. The diary of Headquarters of NZASC lists one column after another which failed to get through to its destination and several came back to Rear Division with their loads intact. Only 5 Brigade units (other than 21 Battalion) were this day supplied so far as Rear Division knew.

Supplies did in fact reach both 4 and 6 Brigades, though in limited quantities and by means hazardous enough to satisfy the most insatiable desire for excitement. The composite supply company ¹ specially formed to replenish 6 Brigade in its detached role got caught up very early, not in the Matruh Stakes but in another 'flap' promoted by South Africans heading back from yesterday's disaster, and got back to Nza Ferigh by about 10 a.m. A more experienced officer than Captain [Roberts](#) ² might have ignored such tales; but they were extraordinarily convincing and the 'contagion of bewilderment and fear and ignorance' ³ needed strong medicine to cure it.

¹ C Sec, Div Amn Coy, and D and H Secs, Div Supply Coln (all with ammunition), A Sec, Div Petrol Coy, and six lorries from B Sec, [4 RMT Coy](#), carrying water.

² [Maj L. W. Roberts](#), MBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Wellington](#), 4 Sep 1911; clerk; OC 2 Amn Coy 1943; OC 1 Sup Coy Oct 1945-Jan 1946; now Regular soldier.

³ Moorehead, [African Trilogy](#), p. 227.

The 6 Brigade Supply Officer, Captain [Bean](#),¹ came into the brigade area early in the morning with a few lorry-loads of supplies. The main body of Divisional Ammunition Company and A Section of Divisional Petrol Company halted a few miles short of 6 Brigade, but Major [Coutts](#)² stood firm against the panicky flood of vehicles which swept past and ignored advice from all quarters to join the exodus. Then a New Zealand provost officer came in and told Coutts to move to Bir el-Haleizin, a few miles south of Sciafsciuf, and Coutts set out at 11 a.m. By 12.20 p.m. he came up behind 22 Armoured Brigade, and since this was firing at tanks directly ahead he had to halt. When he learned that 6 Brigade was urgently in need of ammunition, however, he despatched his B Section at once and it got through, and an hour later he sent off A Section to 4 Brigade at [Gambut](#). This, too, arrived safely; but six lorries carrying Bofors ammunition for 4 Brigade fell into enemy hands. As 22 Armoured Brigade swivelled round to follow the German vehicles with its guns, Coutts had to move a mile south to clear their fields of fire and in this uncertain no-man's land he stayed for the night with the vehicles he had left.

Comings and goings from Nza Ferigh reflected the progress of the enemy advance and those responsible were sorry to see part of the Water Section of the Supply Column, which had set out with wounded at 4 p.m. for a CCS near the frontier, return later with its passengers, having been blocked by German tanks. Another detachment of the Column, No. 2 Echelon under Second-Lieutenant [Cottrell](#),³ had just managed to get to 50 FMC, crossing the spearhead of the panzers, and unloaded 500 prisoners there. By 7 p.m. Cottrell had loaded two-thirds of his lorries, enough supplies for a day's issue to two brigades, and then had to leave as the FMC

staff broke off 'owing to the proximity of enemy armoured forces'. Cottrell then headed through the Wire at [El Beida](#) and found himself among enemy tanks which he tried to outflank by driving due west for 15 miles. By this time enemy flares were rising on all sides and he thought it best to bed down for the night in three close columns, with guards posted 'in all directions' and drivers resting in their cabs ready to drive off at a moment's notice. Tracked vehicles were heard throughout the night but no harm resulted. No. 1 Echelon of the Supply Column ventured westwards from Nza Ferigh at 3 p.m., escorted by six Stuart tanks of 5 Royal Tanks (A Squadron under Major R. N. Wilson) which appeared miraculously from

¹ [Maj L. Bean](#), MBE, m.i.d.; Northern Rhodesia; born England, 19 Sep 1914; school-master; OC 1 Sup Coy Sep 1943-Apr 1944, Nov 1944-Oct 1945.

² [Maj P. E. Coutts](#), MBE, ED, m.i.d.; born [Auckland](#), 4 Dec 1903; salesman; OC 1 Amn Coy Oct 1941-Jan 1943, Feb-Oct 1945; OC 18 Tk Tptry Coy Jan 1943-Mar 1944; accidentally killed 20 Feb 1960.

³ [Capt A. B. Cottrell](#), MC; Bay of Plenty; born [Rotorua](#), 25 Mar 1915; carrier.

nowhere as if for this purpose. But after only seven miles many of the lorries and even some of the tanks sank into boggy ground and the detachment halted for the night. At 11.38 p.m. Headquarters NZASC laid it down to all concerned that future drawings of all kinds of supplies would be from 62 FMC and not from 50 FMC, since the latter was then closely threatened by the enemy armour. But 62 FMC was to be no more likely of access than 50 FMC once Ariete came forward and more trouble was in the offing, as Colonel [Crump](#) ¹ was soon to discover. None of the NZASC convoys was equipped with wireless to keep in touch with the changing situation, and once sent out to or from the Division they were the playthings of chance. In this at least Rommel's sudden move earned unexpected dividends.

Division. Ammunition and other supplies from the dumps beside the [Via Balbia](#) west of [Gambut](#) could only reach the panzer divisions by very roundabout routes, which had first to be explored and opened. As the Quartermaster-General of 15 Panzer noted this day, 'many isolated vehicles went astray in the desert and some of them were captured.' The supply route selected from [Gambut](#) was by way of the Tobruk By-pass and [Sidi Rezegh](#) and 66 metric tons went along it to be delivered during the night. Another 33 lorry-loads followed later but did not reach the By-pass until 4.30 a.m. on the 25th and their time of arrival at 15 Panzer was highly problematical. Another worry was that the fighting had so far entailed a very heavy expenditure of 50-millimetre ammunition and only ten tons remained at the divisional dump. Similar records of 21 Panzer have not survived; but this division was certainly no better off, as its supplies had to be moved westwards in a great hurry to escape 4 New Zealand Brigade. Besides the difficulties and dangers of getting convoys through to [Africa Corps](#), there was the even greater danger that the stocks by the [Via Balbia](#) would be captured; but neither the QMGs concerned, nor Westphal at [El Adem](#), nor Rommel and Cruewell properly appreciated this and all reposed excessive confidence in the ability of Captain Briel's makeshift battle group to hold off marauders.

Westphal was aware that British forces were in the area but had little idea of their strength, and he ordered 3 Reconnaissance Unit to investigate 'enemy south of [Gambut](#)' next day, to 'delay him if

¹ Brig S. H. Crump, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); [Lower Hutt](#); born [Wellington](#), 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915–19; Commander NZASC, 2 NZ Div, 1940–45; comd 2 NZEF, [Japan](#), Jun-Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in [Japan](#), 1948–49.

he advances, and ... withdraw towards [Via Balbia](#)', linking up with Boettcher Group at [Belhamed](#), which was blocking the Trigh Capuzzo. But 3 Reconnaissance Unit had already taken a hard knock in the morning and was by this time well on the way to Libyan Omar. The forces in question, not yet identified as the New Zealand Division, had in fact been forbidden to operate north of the [Via Balbia](#), where they might have strangled all operations of [Africa Corps](#) west of [El Adem](#) by seizing the vital dumps. When 4 Brigade moved on this afternoon towards [Belhamed](#) the

opportunity was lost and a far more direct supply route was available for [Africa Corps](#), though the Germans took some time to discover this. Both sides thus neglected operational and administrative opportunities and it looked as though Eighth Army and Panzer Group Africa were playing a deadly version of Blind Man's Buff.

viii

First thoughts in 6 Brigade on the 24th were to consolidate rather than to attack. Major Mantell-Harding, second-in-command of 24 Battalion, had gone forward at 4.30 a.m. with A Company, some badly-needed company vehicles, and probably 7 and 8 Platoons of 3 MG Company; but the blazing tank which had been pointed out to him as a signpost of the route had burned itself out and he fetched up in no-man's land south of Tomlinson's FDLs. The C Company pickets were not unduly nervous, however, and Mantell-Harding drove through without incident and came upon Shuttleworth as the sky was beginning to lighten. He found the CO 'looking very weary after his hard task of the previous day' but glad to have his battalion once more together, and A Company went into reserve behind C. At about 7 a.m. 26 Battalion moved up along the southern flank and dug in facing south to meet the expected attack, with the hard-hit 9 Platoon of 3 MG Company in support. Only six of the nine Stuart tanks which C Squadron of [8 Royal Tanks](#) took over during the night could be persuaded to start, but the troopers towed the other three into position and by 8 a.m. all were at action stations south of 26 Battalion. Though no attack developed the enemy Army Artillery in the [Belhamed](#) area brought the 6 Brigade box under fire, to which 6 Field Regiment replied vigorously. This exchange chiefly affected the parties engaged in burying the dead in ones and twos and half-dozens where they lay, but it did not deter them and every now and then they were rewarded by finding a wounded man still alive.

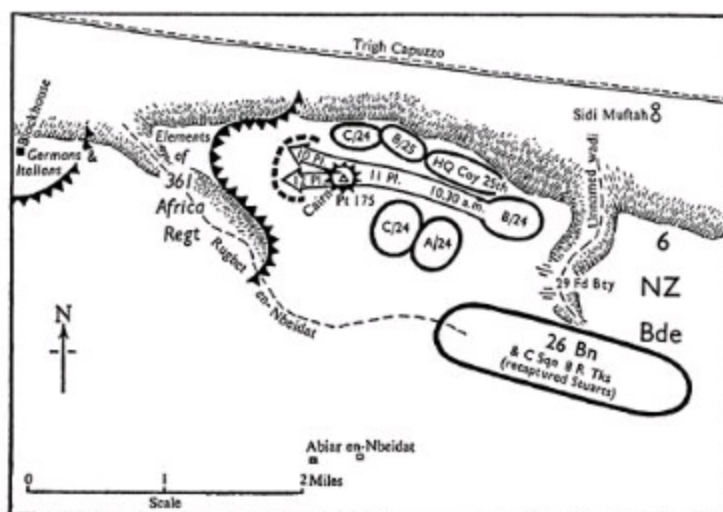
Barrowclough was further reassured by the news that [Divisional Headquarters](#) was not far away and was moving up with 4 Brigade, and by a message from 22 Armoured Brigade that it was 'covering our flank to the SOUTH and our rear to the EAST', though he had no indication of the low strength to which it had been reduced. Stragglers came in, too, from the south with tales of 'complete destruction of their unit by the Panzer units'¹ and confirmed the worst fears about the South African

brigade. When the 'unending stream' of German transport moved to the south-east at a distance of about three miles it was not immediately clear that it took with it all threat of tank attack on 6 Brigade, but the men were naturally glad to see it go.

With the enemy quiescent Barrowclough turned his attention to recapturing the top of the feature ahead, which gave fair observation over most of his position. The enemy had given early promise of opposition when B Company of the 24th moved forward above the escarpment soon after dawn and in so doing came under shell and mortar fire which killed two men and wounded a third. But the enemy infantry were not active and Shuttleworth was encouraged to think that a quick company attack might succeed. This task he gave to B Company, which formed up between 10 a.m. and 10.30 and then advanced with 10 Platoon on the right, 12 on the left and 11 in reserve, to capture the ground around the cairn which marked the trig point. All officers closely concerned with this have since died and post-war recollections of other ranks involved

¹ G. H. Logan, 7 Pl, 24 Bn.

suggest much the same ignorance of the situation that characterised the initial advance of 25 Battalion the day before. 'B Coy was given a "small" job of cleaning up a pocket of resistance', is one view; the task according to another was 'clearing up a few machine gun posts at Pt 175'; a private of 12 Platoon adds this:



NZMS 101/294 Drawn by Lands & Survey Dept., N.Z.

THE CAPTURE OF POINT 175, B COMPANY, 24 BATTALION, 24 NOVEMBER

We placed our greatcoats in a pile to be collected later and on we went with fixed bayonets. It seems that at the top of a slight rise ... the Germans had established an OP so that they were able to direct fire upon our transport in the rear. As we moved forward one or two shots were fired at us, but as we came near the top of the rise the troops in the OP retreated, leaving their gear and what I took to be a radio set.

Another member of 12 Platoon says, 'I remember Capt. [Brown](#)¹ saying it was just a Coy job, with no supporting arms at all, just our own 2" mortars and ... anti-tank rifles.'² D Company, however, was asked to give supporting fire, and perhaps C Company, too. When 10 Platoon, moving forward along the top of the escarpment, got to the three burnt-out Valentines which had become a landmark on that part of the front, it came under fire and went to ground, but the fire was soon lifted as 12 Platoon drove off the enemy around the cairn, and 10 Platoon was urged on by Captain Brown in person as he 'gave us a running commentary on what the Hun was doing'. In so doing Brown attracted much fire himself which drove him from one to another of the derelict tanks.³

B Company had done very well in gaining the cairn at small cost; but like 25 Battalion earlier it found the lure of the ground beyond irresistible. Second-Lieutenant Ashton,⁴ leader of 12 Platoon, gained ground by fire and movement but was killed with several others by long-range mortar or MMG fire on the forward slope and Second-Lieutenant [Breen](#)⁵ of 10 Platoon was badly wounded. Private [Bott](#)⁶ of 12 Platoon who was hit by a mortar burst, has this to say:

All around us chaps were being killed and wounded and the attack was brought to a standstill. Wait until nightfall' was the next order—'in the meantime, find whatever cover you can'.

He also remembers that a runner came up from Shuttleworth to say B Company had gone far enough. In the typescript of his report Barrowclough added in his own handwriting a note that 24 Battalion regained the 'line originally occupied by Col McNaught & from which he had been driven back', and adds a well-deserved compliment: 'This was by a particularly well executed daylight

¹ [Capt C. D. Brown](#), MM; born Raglan, 24 Dec 1897; hardware merchant; [1 NZEF](#) ([3 Bn NZ Rifle Bde](#)); died of wounds 25 Nov 1941.

² Quotations are from accounts by [G. R. Mansel](#), [R. S. Tappin](#), [A. C. Bott](#), and Tappin again, in that order.

³ Tappin.

⁴ 2 Lt [H. B. Ashton](#); born NZ 24 Jun 1918; clerk; killed in action 24 Nov 1941.

⁵ Lt [J. R. Breen](#); [Auckland](#); born NZ 25 Oct 1914; accountant; wounded 24 Nov 1941.

⁶ Pte [A. C. Bott](#); [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 7 May 1915; photo-engraver; wounded and p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

advance'. Much fire came down on the newly captured positions and at 4 p.m. enemy some 800 yards ahead seemed to get ready to counter-attack, though nothing came of it: 'we just lay doggo watching for him to try to push us back again', a corporal recalls, 'but apparently he wasn't game enough.'¹ Brown kept the situation well in hand and did much to encourage his men for the rest of the afternoon in their exposed and uncomfortable posts. Some such inspiration was needed; for B Company had suffered thirty or more casualties in this action, including at least eleven killed. As soon as he could Corporal [Herd](#)² of the signals section of B Company and two others laid a field cable under fire to link Brown with Battalion Headquarters.

The fortunes of B Company were followed anxiously by Brigadier Barrowclough; for he could see with painful clarity that his grip on Hill 175 would remain expensive unless the Rugbet en-Nbeidat and the Blockhouse ridge beyond were also in his hands. As these features began to take shape in his mind as objectives for further attack he had the doleful task of weighing the lives he would have to spend against those he might save. The map had made 175 the dominant point; but the map was deceptive and the sense of relief he hoped to enjoy when he gained the crest was lost in the deceptive lie of the land, which gave the ground around the Blockhouse dominion not only over the forward slopes of 175 but over the south-eastern

approaches, with the Rugbet a covered route for counter-attack.

The need to seize the Blockhouse area was immediate and pointed; but the decision was taken out of his hands when [Freyberg's](#) wider purposes were made known to him and the whole of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment became a stepping stone to [Tobruk](#). The Rugbet and the Blockhouse remained the first objectives, and since the enemy was reported to be 'strongly entrenched'³ around the latter Barrowclough had to think hard about how he would take them. The first steps were to reorganise his present resources to the best effect.

With so many officers lost it was a hard job to fill the key appointments in 25 Battalion; but Major Burton did his best, appointing Lieutenant [Reid](#)⁴ of the mortar platoon as adjutant, and forming two companies from the survivors of those who had fought yesterday, under Lieutenant Henderson and Captain [Wilson](#).⁵

¹ [J. G. Simpson](#), quoted in [Burdon](#), 24 Battalion, p. 66.

² [Sgt J. A. Herd](#), MM; [Helensville](#); born [Invercargill](#), 19 Oct 1895; clerk; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

³ Barrowclough's report.

⁴ [Capt I. D. Reid](#); [Wellington](#); born [Dunedin](#), 12 Sep 1906; public accountant; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁵ [Capt D. A. Wilson](#); born [Napier](#), 14 Aug 1912; barrister and solicitor, killed in action 21 Mar 1943.

Second-Lieutenant [Birch](#),¹ the transport officer, commanded the rump of Headquarters Company. The two rifle companies were built up to a fair strength, in Burton's words, by bringing into the platoon 'pioneers, AA gunners, sanitary men, clerks, cooks, drivers, etc' and also by the return of stragglers from the previous fighting. The battalion numbered only 11 officers and 274 other ranks by one estimate; but Shuttleworth deferred for the time being an amalgamation of 24 and

25 Battalions, though he retained the latter under his command.

Major Veale and his men of [8 Royal Tanks](#) made brave and strenuous efforts, often under fire, to recover several of the damaged Valentines; but they were mostly damaged beyond repair and some were still under such heavy fire that salvage work was impossible. By next morning he nevertheless had four tanks more or less ready for action, apart from the recaptured Stuarts.

[Freyberg](#), too, had Barrowclough's interests very much in mind in view of reports of the heavy losses sustained, and soon after midday he ordered 21 Battalion Group at Bir Sciafsciuf to move at once to Point 175 and come under Barrowclough's command. Various delays were imposed, however, chiefly by uncertainties about what lay to the south, and it was not until dusk that Lieutenant Colonel Allen reported to Barrowclough just short of the unnamed wadi. The latter decided to leave 21 Battalion where it was, just east of 26 Battalion and guarding the southern flank, until morning, when it was to take up position on the eastern end of the southern escarpment. This increment of strength in the brigade group of 22 officers and 609 other ranks would therefore not be available for attacking the Blockhouse; it was more important, as Barrowclough saw, to deny the enemy use of the highest of the three ridges which commanded the area in which [Freyberg](#) hoped to join hands with General Scobie. Barrowclough's resources thus remained stretched taut and the need for a third brigade in the battle to relieve [Tobruk](#), as [Freyberg](#) had predicted, was only too evident.

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Divisional Headquarters Group had meanwhile had troubles of its own at Bir el Chleta, which began when shells started landing in the area soon after dawn and emphasised the poor dispersion of the group. This was quickly corrected and the Divisional staff gave their attention to a project of which 4 Brigade had been warned at 2 a.m. Flares by night had indicated a strong pocket of enemy around Point 172, on the escarpment overlooking [Gambut](#), between

¹ [Capt J. H. Birch](#); born NZ 5 Oct 1913; cashier; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

Headquarters and 4 Brigade, and Inglis was told that 20 Battalion would attack this at first light. But Freyberg decided to reassess the situation at daylight and then see if such a distraction of effort was required. Inglis was expecting 20 Battalion to carry on past this point to rejoin 4 Brigade, and when there was no such sign by 8.16 a.m. he sent C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, to reconnoitre and it quickly drew fire and came back. Headquarters of 1 Army Tank Brigade ¹ had lagged some two miles behind Divisional Headquarters and wrongly surmised that a large group of vehicles to its right front belonged to the New Zealanders, until guns in its midst began to shell the tanks and destroyed one of them, killing two of the crew. Brigadier Watkins got in touch with Freyberg and was told to 'hold A Sqn 8 R Tanks in Div reserve, watching the right rear of the Division'. ² Then he closed up under fire to join the Division, leaving two Valentines, three cruisers and three light tanks as flank guards.

The enemy was evidently disposed in some strength in the area and Freyberg concluded the attack must be mounted. At 8.50 a.m. 20 Battalion was put at five minutes' notice to move. Lieutenant-Colonel Kippenberger was given a rough outline of his task, went forward to see for himself what it entailed, and made his plan. The Valentines were formed up at the bir, flanked to right and left by two 2-pounder portées, and with D Company 300 yards to their right rear and B Company the same distance left rear on a total frontage of some 1000 yards. A and C Companies were 600 yards farther back and with them a platoon of 2 MG Company. The infantry were carried in lorries of C Section, 4 RMT Company, and these were to return to the starting line when they dropped their loads. The Bren carriers already formed a screen in front and at least one was hit by mistake by one of the Valentines. The 26th Field Battery was still under Kippenberger's command and gave supporting fire.

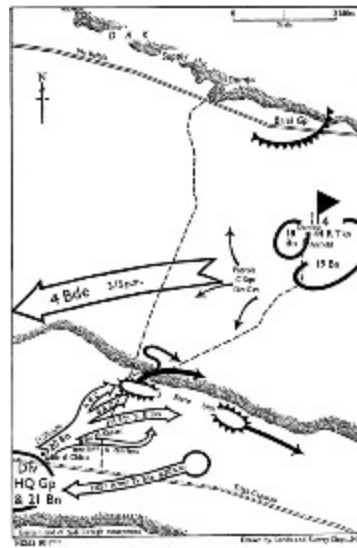
To gain more room for forming up, Kippenberger ordered Major O'Neill of A Squadron, 8 Royal Tanks, to move 800 yards forward and at 11.10 a.m. he did so and reported heavy enemy shellfire. Ten minutes later the tanks advanced at top speed, coming under fire as they did so from another group farther east, and, veering towards this, took the leading infantry with them. Kippenberger tried by R/T to get O'Neill back on the correct bearing without success. But the battalion group reacted quickly as a team and the mortars and carriers, swinging out to the right, gave heavy supporting fire. Speed and violence were essential, Kippenberger had stressed,

¹ With HQ 8 R Tks and A Sqn.

² War diary of 1 Army Tk Bde.

and all possible help was given to the infantry to put them on their objective. Enemy MG fire was low—a mark of good troops—and would have been deadly to troops advancing on foot; but the infantry stayed in their lorries until the last moment. 'The Germans had already knocked out several tanks', a signaller in B Company

says, 'but some were still firing towards the enemy'. ¹ A corporal of the same company remembers a 'decidedly wicked shell which exploded ten feet above the ground', and so the battalion was evidently introduced to the 88-millimetre 'airburst'.
²



THE CAPTURE OF THE BLOCKHOUSE, 25 NOVEMBER

The momentum of the advance, however, was too great for the opposition and even Major [Bevan](#) ³ of 26 Battery could not keep up in his carrier. Moreover, the dust and smoke were so thick that 'it was necessary to fire a round of gun fire from whole Bty' just to observe and correct the fire, an unusual expedient for so skilful a gunner as Bevan. To [Kippenberger](#) it looked as though Bevan was on the wrong target altogether and he later wrote that 'The Arty did not help the attack as their fire was 200 yards from the enemy posn.' ⁴ But Bevan may have been able to see that the

main enemy strength was to the east of the group [Kippenberger](#) meant to attack. Other field guns, too, had joined in, including some with 4 Brigade at [Gambut](#).

By 11.40 a.m. the enemy transport on the objective began to move quickly eastwards to escape the shellfire. Then, when he saw the I tanks halt and the infantry move up through them, [Kippenberger](#) raced up to see what was happening. O'Neill told him '7 of my tanks are hit and I'm rallying';⁵ but [Kippenberger](#) would have none of this, made a forceful reply, and the tanks went on. As A and C Companies drove forward on an impulse he headed them off and directed them to the left of B Company so that all four companies finally advanced in line. As they got close opposition quickly died down and the fight was over. 'As we neared our objective the enemy broke and ran', says [Macpherson](#),⁶ and another account indicates that some of the enemy dropped down the escarpment out of sight. Within twenty-five minutes the tanks rallied and the infantry were ordered to embus. 'Enemy routed', says 20 Battalion diary, 'and heading fast towards [Cairo](#).' The object had been achieved and there was no need for pursuit. In any case a signal had come in from Division at 12.20 p.m. ordering the battalion to move west to rejoin 4 Brigade at 1 p.m.

[Kippenberger](#) and his men were well pleased with themselves, and the losses, two killed and 19 wounded, were moderate in view of the fire the infantry had to pass through. One '88' and two 105-millimetre field howitzers were captured and disabled, a few lorries destroyed, and about twenty-five prisoners taken.

¹ G. F. Clarke.

² J. A. Macpherson.

³ [Maj T. H. Bevan](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Onehunga](#); born [London](#), 27 May 1909; builder; wounded 17 Dec 1942.

⁴ [Kippenberger](#), report in 4 Bde war diary.

⁵ [Kippenberger](#), letter home, 28 Feb 1942.

⁶ Cpl J. A. Macpherson; Studholme, Waimate; born Alexandra, 9 Dec 1911; school teacher; wounded 22 May 1941; wounded and p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

As a sequel Captain [Quilter](#)¹ of 4 Brigade Headquarters, who had been sent to advise [Kippenberger](#) of future movements, had come upon enemy laying mines at the foot of the escarpment, presumably to thwart pursuit. His carrier at once went into action, and after wounding three Germans he rounded up fifty-eight and brought them in without help. A little later carriers of 19 Battalion came upon another cluster of stragglers from this action and killed seven and captured twenty of them.

The losses of A Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), however, were of a different order. Only three men were killed; but seven tanks were lost, and though five of these were eventually recovered it was four days before they were all back in action. This loss had undoubtedly to be paid for later when these tanks were badly needed. In his diary this day [Freyberg](#) commented that '20 Bn carried out successful attack at midday on Sidi Clif style which eliminated nuisance pocket between 20 Bn and rest of 4 Bde'; but it is doubtful if he realised what he had to pay in terms of I tanks. Fortunately B Squadron of [8 Royal Tanks](#) reached 1 Army Tank Brigade this night after a forced march from 5 Brigade at [Fort Capuzzo](#) and helped to make up for the Valentines lost here and the greater loss suffered by C Squadron with 6 Brigade. The anti-tank troop and three carriers were sent to cover the salvaging of the damaged tanks; but long before this was finished they were recalled to 20 Battalion. The infantry had to walk back to their lorries, and some of them who had gone a good way east of Point 172 had a long trudge back. The battalion moved off westwards with [Divisional Headquarters](#), after several false starts, soon after 3 p.m.

German records disclose that the attention paid to the enemy at Point 172 was flattering. No more than a detachment of 3 Reconnaissance Unit was in occupation, the main body of the unit being farther east. The '88' had annoyed 4 Brigade around the [Gambut](#) airfield and had knocked out a Matilda of 44 Royal Tanks; but there was enough field artillery there to keep it quiet. Colonel von Wechmar could feel as satisfied as [Kippenberger](#) with the outcome of the fight. All that the German unit admits losing is the engineer platoon and an attached company of 200 Engineer Battalion, the bulk of which may have been the 61 men surprised by Captain Quilter.

But von Wechmar could no longer hold open the pass up the escarpment south of [Gambut](#), nor were there supply columns to make use of this, and so he withdrew and came upon [15 Panzer Division](#) north-west of [Sidi Omar](#) during the night. The absence of 3 Reconnaissance Unit for the next two days nevertheless greatly handicapped Colonel Westphal in his efforts to find out what was happening outside [Tobruk](#).

¹ [Capt J. P. Quilter](#), ED; [Mataura](#); born [Mataura](#), 10 May 1910; cordial manufacturer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

x

Some of von Wechmar's troops tried at first to slip along the foot of the escarpment westwards but they felt the full force of the field guns of 4 Brigade and quickly changed their minds. For most of the morning 4 Brigade was concerned with enemy concentrations to the north-west, observed by ground troops and Tac/R aircraft and reported in due course to Air Support Control. It did not dawn on any of these observers that the masses of transport belonged mainly to German supply troops, and [Brigadier Inglis](#) was worried about a possible counter-attack. He therefore got 44 Royal Tanks to parade its Matildas in full view of the enemy and Colonel [Duff](#) ¹ engaged targets in this direction with 'a few rounds from all our guns instead of firing the same amount from a single troop or battery'. ² A signal of 12.40 p.m. spoke of a brigade with many tanks ready to attack 4 Brigade on a frontage of at least two miles from some seven miles west of [Gambut](#). 'Vehicles as far as can be seen', it added. At 1.15 p.m. 1 Survey Troop was sent to Point 172 to locate guns in this enemy mass by flash-spotting and by 2.30 was established there for this purpose with complete line telephone. Five minutes later, however, the troop was told to close down and be ready to move westwards at 3.15 p.m.

Duff mentions a troublesome '5·9' gun which could not be pinpointed so that counter-battery action was 'very sketchy'. ³ It was in fact a 150-millimetre howitzer which Captain Briel had obtained to strengthen his little force guarding the dumps of [Africa Corps](#), together with some tanks from the nearby workshops which came forward as soon as they were repaired and eventually numbered five. It was a useful weapon; but Briel credited it in his report with full responsibility for the many

readjustments of position the various elements of 4 Brigade carried out in the course of the morning, so that the paragraph in question, telling of the effects of its fire, is an amusing fantasy:

The result was excellent. The British battery had to change position several times, the OP could not operate from the escarpment, and the British vehicles charged round the airfield in wild confusion.

Then Briel writes of a gesture he made which would have been mere bravado had 4 Brigade not already prepared to move westwards to come abreast of 6 Brigade. He 'opened a vigorous fire with 5 tanks' and attacked towards [Gambut](#) with his small band of

¹ [Brig C. S. J. Duff](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born [Wellington](#), 19 Nov 1898; Regular soldier; comd 34 NZ A-Tk Bty 1939–40; CO 7 A-Tk Regt Oct 1940–May 1941; [4 Fd Regt](#) Aug 1941–Apr 1942; CRA 3 NZ Div Aug 1942–Oct 1944; NZLO Melbourne, 1947–48.

² [Inglis](#), narrative, 1952.

³ Duff, report in 4 Bde diary.

infantry, again with 'excellent results'. It must have been then that 4 Brigade moved off, and Briel naturally connected the two and was able to conclude his report with warm satisfaction:

The battle group had accomplished the task I had been given in spite of the enemy's great superiority in men and weapons. We had held our positions and enabled the supply services of [Africa Corps](#) to escape and to ensure the Corps' supplies.

Briel had reason to be proud and his little force had done well; but the real saviour of the supplies of [Africa Corps](#) was someone in Corps or Army who laid it down that [Inglis](#) was not to get committed north of the [Via Balbia](#).

The move by 4 Brigade and [Divisional Headquarters](#) of 8–12 miles went off with no greater incident than a few bursts of MG fire at dusk from an isolated enemy pocket in the escarpment, along the foot of which [Divisional Headquarters](#) was advancing with no fighting troops directly in front. This caused a celebrated 'about turn' and the Group retraced its steps for half a mile; but 21 Battalion joined 6 Brigade as arranged and 20 Battalion caught up with 4 Brigade half an hour after the latter halted. By some misunderstanding 6 Brigade was expecting 4 Brigade to attack Point 175 from below the escarpment, and when Shuttleworth reported at dusk that he was in contact with 20 Battalion to his right rear Barrowclough assumed that an attack had in fact taken place, persuaded perhaps by the firing which broke out in front of [Divisional Headquarters](#).

[Freyberg](#) was now able to correct some of the misapprehensions which lingered from the false reports of the early fighting and which as late as 9 a.m. this day allowed him to think that 5 South African Brigade was eight miles south of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) airfield and under his command. He planned to extend the line northwards from there to [Belhamed](#), as Godwin-Austen had ordered. A situation report issued by Division at that time estimated that the main strength of the enemy lay at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#), and that at least eight enemy battalions held the east sector of the [Tobruk](#) front with a total of 119 guns of calibres ranging from 75-millimetres to 150. Even with the combined strength of the New Zealand Division (counting, as G Branch did at first, the now-defunct South African brigade) and the [Tobruk](#) garrison this promised severe fighting, in the course of which 30 Corps could give far less help than [Freyberg](#) was relying on. Then [Freyberg](#) received his first detailed news of the fighting at Point 175, as he noted in his diary:

Got in wireless comn with 6 Bde at last—B. sounds cheerful enough but has had pretty tough time and Sqn of Valentines knocked out except for 2 plus 120 casualties, including McNaught wounded and 3 coy comds killed. Germans suffered heavily. At present 6 Bde is being shelled by 105mm guns which, of course, outrange our 25 pr. 5 SA Bde reported over-run by enemy tanks and to have dispersed South. 6 Bde are ready for possible tank attack and hoping rest of Div is on way. Sent them message re our plans to clear up area here at 1100 hrs and move at about 1230 with 4 Inf Bde and 21 Bn to swing on to B's front.

But the Divisional staff remained hopeful that first reports of the disaster to the South African brigade were exaggerated and marked it on a sketch in an intelligence summary even next day as a formed body rather south of where it was previously expected to be, thinking it might have been driven southwards but not put right out of the battle.

With his two brigades in line about 12 miles from the nearest elements of 70 Division, [Freyberg](#) now had to plan the next phase of operations to link up with [Tobruk](#). His first impulse was to drive straight ahead at once regardless of opposition; but Brigadier Miles urged caution. The next step was a conference with his brigadiers, reported in his diary as follows:

Barrowclough and [Inglis](#) came in for a conference. 6 Bde are weary but cheerful. They have been warned by 30 Corps to be ready for an attack by large concentration tanks presence of which is confirmed by Tac R. (CN ¹: Brig Watkin[s] pays a tribute to Gentry. 'He is the calmest G1 I have ever met—nothing shakes him.' I agree, remembering [Monemvasia](#). ²)

6 Bde hold crest of 175 without having observation on the Wadi. Barrowclough reported that 26 Bn had gone forward and been in contact with 5 SA Bde. The latter had been attacked by tanks and completely overrun. They had broken to the South. The 26 Bn were isolated but held their position splendidly and one troop of arty is reported to have knocked out 24 German tanks. They also killed a lot firing over open sights.

Question of points to take was discussed.

CRA: 'If we strike any stiff opposition at all I think we are in a very insecure position if we do not have the top escarpment.' Intelligence officer Corps says Boche did not have more than 100 tanks and that is not taking into account what happened yesterday.

GOC: 'Consider Boche are going and that fires seen are destruction of material.'

It was agreed that going along the escarpment was a night show. ³

GOC: 'The only thing that frightens me from going straight on are his guns.'

Finally decided that 6 Bde should enlarge their show without worrying about timing of attack while 4 Bde should advance to overlook country up to Bir Hamed [Belhamed].

¹ Chronicler's Note—i.e., a note by Capt White, the GOC's PA, giving his personal opinion and not Gen Freyberg's. White prepared most of the diary, quoting Freyberg's actual words whenever possible.

² In Greece.

³ i.e., that shortage of artillery ammunition and other considerations made it advisable to attack by night rather than by day along the top of the escarpment.

In saying that he thought the 'Boche are going' Freyberg of course meant the whole of Panzer Group Africa, and none of those present had any knowledge of what Africa Corps was doing this day. Barrowclough's immediate object of relieving an irksome situation by a short advance to the west was radically different from Freyberg's fear lest the enemy should slip away altogether. Freyberg nevertheless remained very confident and signalled to Godwin-Austen at 11.39 p.m. as follows:

Have now formed up as binary division without Div Cav. Large pockets enemy still in our rear. We are attacking westward and are now on a line running north and south through Pt 175.... If we had petrol and ammunition we might have been in Tobruk early tomorrow. As it is we hope to get there tomorrow night but impossible to be definite.

This was just the sort of message Godwin-Austen expected from Freyberg and it must have done much to offset other curious and worrisome reports which reached Corps this day.

The plan eventually agreed to in outline at the brigadiers' conference and later confirmed was that 4 Brigade should advance three miles at dawn on the 25th to a line running from Zaafran south to the Trigh Capuzzo, and that 6 Brigade should seize the Rugbet and the Blockhouse area in a swift advance before first light.

'Hargest is happy', the GOC noted in his diary, 'and thinking of going into Salum. He sent me a cheerful letter. Reported that Army Comd is very pleased with what NZ Div has done'. Then [Freyberg](#) went to bed and next morning noted, 'Turned in for some sleep feeling sure that the Boche had gone'. Rommel was equally certain that the New Zealand Division lay at his mercy north of the frontier line.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 13 – THE CAPTURE OF THE BLOCKHOUSE

CHAPTER 13

The Capture of the Blockhouse

i

FREYBERG'S immediate opponent was Major-General Boettcher of 104 Artillery Command, who commanded what was left of 155 Infantry and 361 Africa Regiments and 900 Engineer Battalion, all of them much weakened. Italian reinforcements were at hand, however, and Rommel had told Boettcher to be ready to attack [Tobruk](#). Boettcher therefore issued a hopeful warning order on 24 November; but like many others in this fluctuating battle, he had to eat his words almost at once and issue very different orders. Panzer Group Headquarters began to get worried about the British force approaching from [Gambut](#) and gave Major-General Suemmermann, to the north of Boettcher, the dual role of opposing any further break-out by the [Tobruk](#) garrison in the northern sector and halting any westerly advance along the [Via Balbia](#). For this Suemmermann had the rest of his own Africa Division and between the road and the sea an Italian battalion. Linking with him, Boettcher now had to face eastwards on both sides of the Trigh Capuzzo and prevent a junction between the oncoming British and the [Tobruk](#) garrison. Boettcher's revised orders started with the announcement that 'About a division of the enemy, with tanks, is moving on [Tobruk](#) from the east.' Therefore 361 Regiment was to take up a line from the mouth of Rugbet en-Nbeidat northwards halfway to [Zaafran](#), and 155 Regiment was to extend this line to a point two miles north-east of [Belhamed](#), while the engineer battalion less two companies was to occupy [Belhamed](#) itself, where Boettcher would open his headquarters.

The German troops were thus leaving the [Sidi Rezegh](#) and southern escarpments and concentrating to the north. Panzer Group Africa hoped to put Italian troops on these two vital features, but it was some time before 9 Bersaglieri Regiment of Trieste Division could get into position facing 6 Brigade. When the latter attacked in the morning, therefore, it came upon more troops of the regiment it had already met on 175, the former French Foreign Legionaries of the 361st. Elements of Pavia or [Trieste](#) were to take over the southern escarpment, but there were still Germans there late next day.

Sixth Brigade was to advance on a two-battalion front before dawn on the 25th. On the right 24 Battalion was to cross the Rugbet to capture the high ground around the Blockhouse and carry on westwards for some distance along the top of the escarpment. On the left 26 Battalion was to move on parallel lines a little to the south to about as far as the [Sidi Rezegh](#) airfield, though 6 Brigade did not yet know this existed and the actual objective given was a line on the map. After dawn the operation was to be widened by sending 21 Battalion to seize the eastern end of, the southern escarpment; but the 21st were warned not to become involved in heavy fighting. The one known centre of opposition in all these objectives was the Blockhouse.

Colonel Shuttleworth of the 24th gave out his orders about midnight at a rendezvous 1000 yards east of Point 175. His objective was to 'capture feature "BLOCKHOUSE" and advance a maximum distance of 2 miles'. D Company would be forward on the right and C on the left, with B and A Companies respectively behind them. The starting line was the existing front of the two leading companies, about 400–500 yards west of the cairn, and the starting time 4.30 a.m. The Blockhouse itself was the centre of the initial objective, which allowed a frontage for each company of something like 300 yards. Headquarters Company was to bring forward essential vehicles and gear and with the carriers was to come in behind the leading companies starting at 6.30 a.m. ¹ Similar provisions were made for 26 Battalion, which was to advance on foot to the airfield, starting at 4 a.m. and 'hoping to reach the place before daybreak'. ²

Anti-tank support was important, as the main enemy strength, including the panzers, was thought to be at [Sidi Rezegh](#). The usual allotment of anti-tank guns was made to the attacking troops; but these could not fire by night and would move forward as soon as they could after first light. As added protection 22 Armoured Brigade guarded the southern flank. No field artillery support was planned, but when Colonel Weir heard the details he put his 48 Battery in direct support of 24 Battalion and 29 Battery in support of 26 Battalion, with 30 Battery covering the whole front as the other two batteries moved forward. Fire would be by observation and could not therefore start until daytime. The MMG platoons took no part in the advance and

returned to 3 MG Company, presumably so they could be concentrated next morning wherever the situation demanded. Thus the night advance was very much an infantry task, with Tommy gun, bayonet, grenade and Bren gun the principal

¹ Maj S. J. Hedge (HQ Coy) and Lts E. C. Laurie and M. L. Hill, Apr 1942.

² Maj E. F. Walden (D Coy).

weapons. The task of the 24th was chiefly expected to be 'winkling the enemy out of the wadis in the dark'. ¹ Fourth Brigade, with two Matilda squadrons leading over fairly flat ground and strong field artillery, could set objectives clearly and plan a 'tidy' advance; all Barrowclough could do was to advance in a state of readiness for action. A set-piece attack along the top of the escarpment was out of the question because of uncertainty as to the whereabouts and nature of the enemy and the irregularities of the ground.

This applied only to 24 Battalion, which had by far the hardest task. The deep Rugbet was a difficult obstacle in the dark and the Blockhouse beyond was on commanding ground. There was a hope, however, that the enemy might have withdrawn from the forward area and the silent attack might then sweep up the slopes opposite and take the enemy in the Blockhouse area by surprise.

In the event the attackers had no such luck and met enemy soon after they started. This enemy was indeed taken unawares and in the Rugbet some men of 25 Battalion held prisoner in tents were released. But the firing which broke out soon gave the game away and the enemy at the Blockhouse was wide awake. Germans in the Rugbet were 'pushed back by the use of the bayonet and by us spraying the ground in front with tommy guns and with rifles fired from the hip' and casualties were 'fairly slight'. ² Shuttleworth had stressed that the men should keep 'well spread out, a difficult thing, as men tend to bunch together more closely in the dark'. ³ A short burst of fire at the edge of the wadi, controlled by Shuttleworth himself, and then a quick bayonet charge carried the men through to the other side at small cost. Then heavy and well-organised machine-gun fire met them and Shuttleworth ordered Captain Tomlinson to take C Company round to the left to avoid the worst of

this and Captain Jones to take D to the right, where the slopes were steeper and fixed-line fire therefore less deadly.

C Company got through with little harm and 'successfully dug themselves into position as dawn broke and we found ourselves on sloping ground just below the blockhouse'; ⁴ but D Company ran into heavier fire and was for some time held down. 'It was still in the dark', Shakespear says, 'and I could hear men being hit'. As the firing eased the men pushed on and dug in on the slopes of a minor wadi and on the western side of the Rugbet, and as the darkness dispersed they could see the Blockhouse above them and came under fire from machine guns near it. The building itself looked like a 'strongly built pillbox' ⁵ and there seemed no way of

¹ Inglis.

² Tomlinson.

³ Shakespear.

⁴ Tomlinson.

⁵ D. H. Turner (17 Pl, D Coy).

getting close to it without prohibitive losses. As the scene unfolded in the bleak morning further dangers emerged: some men came under fire from their own mortars, the Vickers guns of 3 MG Company, and even the 25-pounders as these added their contributions to the 'supporting' fire. Shakespear says that the men around him were luckily dug in well enough to escape being hit by the MMGs: 'Their aim was very good'. Another man of D Company, Lynn, ¹ speaks of coming under fire from farther back or from 4 Brigade on the flat to the right rear, and says this 'only ceased when one of the men made a hazardous dash across the wadi to identify himself to the offenders.' Among these were mortars of 4 Brigade, but they did little harm: 'No dead but a few scratches'. ² A Company of the 24th, watching from behind, saw one platoon of 20 Battalion gallantly try to fight its way up the slopes to

the Blockhouse in broad daylight in an unscheduled effort to help and get driven back with considerable loss.



LINKING UP WITH TOBRUK, 26 NOVEMBER AND NIGHT 26-7 NOVEMBER

The reserve companies of the 24th had meanwhile met opposition, not only from pockets by-passed in the dark but from machine guns in the Blockhouse area, and one of the casualties here was Captain Brown of B Company. 'I remember Charlie singing out "Keep going boys, they're firing over our heads" ', says Private Bott, 'and the next thing we know he was smacked in the ankle.' Then B Company dropped down into the Rugbet and carried on half-right up the far slope, ignoring the food, clothing and equipment strewn everywhere and intent only on helping D Company. One Bren-gunner was hit here and a friend heard the bullets 'smacking into' his chest and turned to see him lying 'with his face pale and his eyes open'. [CSM Derbyshire](#)³ was hit at the head of his men and fell face downwards and arm outstretched as if still striving in death to reach his objective, and those who followed even some time later were moved and uplifted by the eloquence of his posture and the spirit it betokened.

A Company had followed up behind C and found itself almost worse off than those ahead, coming under steady MG fire which hugged the ground in deadly fashion. The men had no choice but to lie low for some time. Later in the morning those who could see through the V-shaped mouth of the Rugbet watched 4 Brigade drive forward, halt, and send the infantry forward on foot in extended line with tanks leading and guns in support, a thrilling spectacle though somehow remote as if in a

different world from that of the harassed spectators.

¹ Pte R. D. Lynn; born Auckland, 21 Apr 1910; farm manager; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

² Cpls A. C. Opie and C. W. Buckeridge jointly; Buckeridge was wounded here, with 'most of 18 Pl.'

³ WO II J. A. M. Derbyshire; born Palmerston North, 8 Sep 1910; photo-engraver; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

Farther back there were other troubles as Major Hedge ¹ tried to get Headquarters Company forward but ran into 'intense MG fire' and 48 Battery drove on to unmarked and hastily-laid minefields on which four vehicles were disabled. A section of 8 Field Company quickly came up and lifted these Teller mines, some of which had not even been buried.

All this was in complete contrast to the experiences of 26 Battalion, the rifles companies of which trudged forward for four miles with C on the right and D on the left, crossing the upper part of the Rugbet where it was shallow and then traversing flat ground at such a pace that despite the cold of the night the men soon began to feel the weight of their greatcoats. Green flares rose from time to time some way off, but there was no other sign of enemy until after daybreak, when the leading companies still had some distance to go. As the horizon receded C Company came under MG fire from the right rear, near the Blockhouse, which wounded one man but was not nearly heavy or accurate enough to halt the advance. As B Company followed C, however, this fire thickened up with mortar bombs and anti-tank shot and it was evident that 24 Battalion had made much less progress than had been hoped. C and D Companies reached the edge of the airfield with ease and there started to dig in, and Colonel Page reported back accordingly to Brigade. Enemy lorries could be seen about a mile to the east, but they made no threatening moves. Page could now see that Shuttleworth needed help and he therefore halted B Company and ordered it to wheel to the north-east and deal with the enemy who were causing the trouble.

By this time the Blockhouse was very much the centre of attention. Fire from 6 Field Regiment and 3 MG Company poured into the area, aided by the mortars of both battalions and by some fire from 4 Brigade on the flat below. Barrowclough himself went so far forward that it took heavy covering fire from A Company to extricate him. He came to the same conclusion as Shuttleworth: that the southern flank was the most promising. Thus Page's move was most opportune. It linked with one by 7 Platoon of 24 Battalion which was swinging wide to the south and attracting much fire in so doing. Major Hedge, seeing this, sent his carrier platoon to help and the carriers raced forward, passing 7 Platoon south of the Blockhouse and veering towards an extensive enemy position to the west. B Company of the 26th pushed forward with mortars in support and

¹ Lt-Col S. J. Hedge, ED; Paeroa; born Waiuku, 25 Nov 1896; chemist and optician; Wgtn Regt, 1 NZEF, 1917–19; 2 i/c 24 Bn 30 Nov 1941–15 Jan 1942; CO NZ Reception Depot Feb–May 1943; CO 1 Bn Hauraki Regt 1944–49.

the carriers of the 26th also joined in. The action was clearly reaching a climax and those of 24 Battalion who had been forced for some time to lie low now found it hard to restrain themselves. Two sections of 11 Platoon and one of 12 Platoon edged forward on the left and other detachments all along the front, with a burning desire to help, tried to close in on the Blockhouse. All were grounded, however, by withering fire which killed Second-Lieutenant Upton ¹ of 26 Battalion and many another and wounded many more. The carriers of 26 Battalion became entangled with mines and anti-tank guns at the western edge of the position and their commander, Lieutenant Westenra, ² received wounds from which he later died. Several carriers were hit and for a few moments it looked as though the defence had triumphed.

The combined efforts of all, however, had a cumulative effect and the end when it came was sudden. When 7 Platoon of 24 Battalion reached a point very near the southernmost enemy posts, some Germans stood up as if to surrender and 7 Platoon, overjoyed, ran forward. But Lieutenant Yeoman ³ of the 24th carriers could see enemy behind who showed no such intention, and in a blaze of fury at what he thought was a dirty trick he led three carriers forward at top speed into the enemy

position. They came under fire and the gunner of one was killed; but they got into the enemy's midst at a moment when the whole area was churned up by a heavy concentration of shellfire and the defenders were quickly infected with panic. In all directions they rose from trenches and sangars and gave themselves up, some to 24 Battalion but most to 26 Battalion, whose carriers soon rounded them up. The total captured has various estimates, the lowest of which is 200, and the New Zealanders were much surprised at the number of Germans and Italians who appeared on the scene and at the wide extent of the defences they disclosed. Artillery fire carried on for a minute or two until an FOO managed to stop it. Then the prisoners were mustered and the position explored. Five carriers of 24 Battalion pushed on westwards along the top of the ridge until they were held up about a mile from the Blockhouse by three anti-tank guns. These were eventually driven off by artillery fire and the whole position was thus captured. The enemy farther west began to shell and mortar the position and a platoon of D Company was sent out to locate the mortars; it carried on for two or three miles but could not find them, and when it came under fire from 6 Field Regiment

¹ 2 Lt J. R. Upton; born [Ashburton](#), 3 Oct 1907; seed-cleaning contractor; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

² Lt W. D. Westenra; born [Christchurch](#), 8 Jan 1911; farm manager; died of wounds 29 Nov 1941.

³ Capt A. C. Yeoman, MC; [Auckland](#); born Taneatua, 8 Sep 1904; farmer; twice wounded.

at dusk it withdrew. B Company and the carriers of 26 Battalion returned to their unit later in the afternoon and 24 Battalion was left in possession of the ground around the much-talked-of Blockhouse. This proved on closer examination to be no more than an Arab lodge, a resting place for travellers, solidly constructed of stone and white plaster, white-tiled inside, a peaceful resort and not at all like the concrete strongpoint most men imagined.

Twenty-sixth Battalion had meanwhile watched enemy moving to the north and

north-west and on the far side of the airfield (actually supply lorries of [Africa Corps](#)) and came under MG, mortar and artillery fire which wounded fourteen men. There was every evidence that enemy had left the airfield recently and in great haste, for their belongings were strewn among the wreckage which remained from the earlier fighting. Parties of the battalion went out to bury the dead still lying among the shattered tanks, guns, lorries and other equipment of 7 Armoured Division.

Barrowclough had meanwhile on [Freyberg's](#) orders sent 21 Battalion Group to occupy part of the southern escarpment and it set out at 9.45 a.m. for Hareifet en-Nbeidat, where at 12.45 it came under mortar fire and halted. This move took the group through part of the battlefield on which 7 Armoured Division had been defeated and to the edge of the ground on which the South Africans were overrun, and the New Zealanders, knowing nothing of these events, were astounded at what they saw. Many of the vehicles in the area were in working order and one German troop-carrying lorry and three 'runabout cars' were salvaged, as well as blankets to replace those lost at [Bir Ghirba](#), two Tommy guns, two Vickers guns, three 3-inch mortars, and much ammunition. Only lack of time and carrying space limited this haul.

The companies dug in, 47 Battery began to return the enemy fire, and then a carrier patrol was sent forward. This soon came upon a dressing station guarded by seven Germans who were taken prisoner. The fifty patients included Lieutenant-Colonel Mason of 2 Regiment Botha and other wounded from 5 South African Brigade as well as a few Germans. From Mason 21 Battalion learned that part of its orders could not be carried out: 'Supposed to contact 5 SA Bde during day', the unit war diary states. According to Mason this brigade had been 'surprised on previous Sunday on ground now occupied by us and almost annihilated'. Another of the instructions Lieutenant-Colonel Allen of the 21st had been given was to block all enemy movement along the strip of desert between the [Sidi Rezegh](#) and southern escarpments, and to carry this out the battalion would have to occupy a good deal of the latter. The point mentioned in this connection was another 175, nearly two miles east of Bir Bu Creimisa and roughly due south of the western end of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) ridge. But Allen was specifically forbidden to get heavily engaged with the enemy and soon found that he could not make much progress westwards without a hard fight.

New instructions from 6 Brigade put any further advance on the southern escarpment out of the question. In the afternoon of 25 November Brigade Headquarters closed up on 24 Battalion, Burton moved 25 Battalion up to the western slopes of the Rugbet en-Nbeidat, Weir sited Headquarters of 6 Field Regiment at its mouth and moved his batteries well forward, and 8 Field Company moved up to the western edge of Point 175.

iii

Below the escarpment 4 Brigade had advanced three miles due west in box formation, with 19 Battalion on the northern flank, 44 Royal Tanks and 18 Battalion leading, and 20 Battalion on the southern side, all with instructions not to press on against heavy opposition. The whole move took little more than an hour and by 7.30 a.m. 18 Battalion was digging in on a frontage of 2000 yards level with the western end of Point 175 and 1000 yards west of the given objective. A Squadron, 44 Royal Tanks, led the way and 'ten minutes after the kick off, the tanks had 150 prisoners and could whistle reserve transport forward to collect them before they changed their minds.'¹ These enemy were taken quite unawares and no shot was fired; by one account they 'reckoned they thought it was their own tanks approaching'.² Enemy farther west, however, were fully alerted and 18 Battalion engaged them from the new position while 20 Battalion, nearer the escarpment, came under fire from the direction of the Blockhouse which caused [Colonel Kippenberger](#) to dispense with the troop-carrying lorries and continue the advance on foot. On the right 19 Battalion came under shellfire on [Zaafran](#) which wounded one or two men.

The advance had been carried out with ease, but opposition now hardened. The leading tanks attracted anti-tank fire from the southwest and 18 Battalion was machine-gunned persistently from the same direction. A low ridge halfway between the Blockhouse and [Zaafran](#) and pointing towards [Belhamed](#) enfiladed the front and was evidently held in some strength. C Squadron, 44 Royal Tanks, therefore pushed forward at 8.15 a.m. and cleared this ridge. When the whole tank battalion rallied half an hour later it was found that one Matilda was burnt out and seven others damaged, a serious loss which had its repercussions later.

¹ Bassett.

Mortar fire also came down heavily at times on the front, and when an FOO of 4 Field Regiment went forward with two assistants to deal with this he was seriously wounded and his assistants killed. A Troop of 31 Anti-Tank Battery had gone forward in close support of the I tanks, and when these withdrew a short distance the portées carried on alone to deal with an enemy post. The gun A1 got to within 100 yards when an anti-tank gun opened fire on the portée and scored three direct hits, destroying the 2-pounder, killing the gun-sergeant, [Maffey](#), ¹ and badly wounding a bombardier, [Sim](#). ² Maffey was well known and liked and the smoke ring which rose slowly from the burning vehicle and could be seen for miles became known as 'Maffey's Halo'. The troop commander, Lieutenant [Harding](#), ³ and the survivors of the gun crew managed to get Sim back through 500 exposed yards to a place of safety. The gun A4 was hit shortly afterwards and its sergeant wounded. At least one enemy anti-tank gun, however, was also knocked out, and when C Squadron of 44 Royal Tanks came forward a little later it finished off all the other enemy guns in the area. B Company brought in six more prisoners and later in the morning a section of carriers of 18 Battalion patrolled forward and collected another 15, as well as bringing back two wounded members of an I-tank crew.

Skirmishing on the 18 Battalion front was all over by about 9 a.m. and the only persistent fighting was that in which A Company of the 20th was involved at the mouth of the Rugbet. Fire from the Blockhouse area held up the advance here and 9 Platoon made a brave effort to overcome this on its own initiative, not knowing what 24 Battalion was doing to the same end. The battalion mortars gave support when they saw it was needed and B Company on the right tended to veer round to face the Blockhouse to help A, while C extended northwards to link with 18 Battalion. Lieutenant [Guthrey](#) ⁴ of the carrier platoon had a hot time rescuing two badly wounded men from a crippled carrier and Lieutenant Hill ⁵ of C Troop was killed by shellfire together with his driver when he led his 2-pounders forward in close support of 20 Battalion. Even B Company, following behind A, came under MG fire which was 'very thick' according to one account. 'Evidently the enemy machine gunners were well

¹ Sgt H. G. E. Maffey; born England, 18 Jan 1917; Regular soldier; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

² Bdr G. F. Sim; Te Poi, Matamata; born Gisborne, 1911; stock agent; MP 1943-; wounded 25 Nov 1941. Sim became the first returned serviceman of the Second World War to gain a seat in the House of Representatives.

³ Maj A. F. Harding, MC; Wellington; born Wanganui, 27 Nov 1916; accountant; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

⁴ Lt A. R. Guthrey, MC; Christchurch; born Rawene, 15 Jan 1916; clerk; wounded Nov 1941.

⁵ 2 Lt M. C. Hill, MC; born Wellington, 11 Jul 1913; assurance clerk; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

dug in, for we advanced no further that day.’¹ Many of the 20th saw the final stage of the attack on the Blockhouse and the ‘Large numbers of Germans’² surrendering. This eased the situation, but the battalion stayed where it was, mainly because of a stream of reports of enemy counter-thrusts of various kinds which 26 Field Battery was flatteringly credited with rebuffing. No such thrusts actually took place and the enemy movements seen ahead were not at all menacing.

iv

It did not take General Freyberg long in the morning of the 25th to realise that his feelings about the enemy's departure were some what premature, and he noted in his diary that ‘there was no doubt the enemy were ahead still in strength’. A quick tour of the 4 Brigade area, however, showed no cause for anxiety, though the shortage of ammunition meant a waste of the ‘splendid observation and targets’ from the FDLs of 18 and 19 Battalions. Back at Divisional Headquarters in the late morning he heard a first report of ‘strong enemy armed force supposed to be in the area of the Omars’, though this was hard to reconcile with current Tac R estimates of ‘tanks up to 100 on our front’. Panzers were reported in the area of 50 FMC and it was ‘clear we will not get any more amn’. Like his superiors Freyberg thought that

'the Armd force going East is a last desperate effort' and it made no difference to his plans except to encourage economy in field-gun ammunition. Gentry was 'not at all anxious about the situation' and Inglis 'imperturbable'. Both were thinking in terms of a dawn attack next day coinciding with the final stage of the break-out from Tobruk to Ed Duda. A short visit by the GOC to 6 Brigade after lunch did nothing to change these plans. B Squadron of the King's Dragoon Guards was this morning placed under Freyberg's command and told to patrol south and east of Point 175 to give warning of any threat to the flank or rear of the Division, and RHQ and 257 Battery of 65 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, came under command, having been bombed on the way from the frontier. The 259th Battery had already joined the Division and the 260th was soon to follow, a most welcome reinforcement.

When Freyberg returned to his headquarters he was assured in a letter from Godwin-Austen of further support in the form of strong air attacks against the enemy facing him. The letter was warmly encouraging:

¹ L-Cpl Clarke of the Sigs section.

² Sgt E. S. Allison.

My dear Freyberg,

I have just received your heartening message of 24 Nov. You have done splendidly—I quite realise that you cannot be definite yet as to entry into TOBRUK but am most anxious that you should join forces at first light 26 Nov if humanly possible.

SCOBIE says that the bit between his forces and ED DUDA is strongly covered by enemy artillery so that he might more profitably, from his point of view, make his main sortie through the North Eastern Sector ¹ which has been thinned out by the enemy. He feels that this would also cause more confusion to the enemy who would be attacked from two directions and have his communications threatened. I have told him to make the plan he thinks best but that any plan he makes MUST INCLUDE A DEFINITE FIRM AND SECURE JUNCTION WITH YOU ON THE ED DUDA POSITION. I attach a copy of my

signal to him.

I have to give him FIVE hours' notice for his sortie—This means I should have SEVEN hours' notice from you if possible. Moreover owing to the uncertainty of W/T after dark it will be of great value to me if I could receive notice from you by 1600 hrs today.

I would also like to know at earliest the area in which the Air Force can safely put down for you direct air support in the form of the biggest blitz the Hun has yet seen, and times between which you would like it put down. Let me know if I can, from the Corps point of view, do anything in regard to ammunition, petrol and supply. I would make any conceivable emergency arrangement possible.

The general situation is that the enemy has flung mobile columns with tanks and lorried infantry across the area lately occupied by 30 Corps and that some have reached the 4 Ind Div area. I do not think he will do much harm and am, of course, sticking to our primary objective—linking hands with SCOBIE. But it might conceivably arise that you had to join with him and be based on **TOBRUK** and scrap the present L of C at any rate temporarily. 22 Armoured Bde has been placed under my command but I cannot at the moment gain touch with them. If by chance there is an L.O. or anyone from them in touch with you, please send him here. I shall use them for clearing and keeping open your L of C.

Yours very sincerely,

0945 hrs. Godwin.

The signal to Scobie cast doubt on the wisdom of a proposal to break out to the west and not along the direct route to Ed Duda though it did not forbid it. **Freyberg** hoped to reach Ed Duda during the night and Scobie should therefore be ready to attack from first light on the 26th and should send the agreed code-words when the time came.

Scobie's attitude was understandably cautious. He had already been badly let down by 30 Corps and had no wish to extend the existing bulge in his perimeter to

Ed Duda if there was any likelihood that the New Zealand Division would also fail to keep the rendezvous there. There was no obvious reason why this division should succeed after the whole of 30 Corps had failed; and opposition in the

¹ North-western sector was meant, as the accompanying signal indicated.

sector chosen for the break-out had proved far stronger than expected. Godwin-Austen could see his point and after further reflection sent another order to Scobie and Freyberg intended mainly to reassure the former:

Have no intention order SCOBIE to advance on—¹ ED DUDA till FREYBERG has reached that area. When that happens SCOBIE will join forces with FREYBERG at all costs. Corridor from ED DUDA and SIDI REZEGH on south and Tobruk perimeter on north will then be firmly consolidated. (Inter?)—div boundary all incl FREYBERG BELHAMED-ED DUDA. Time of attack on ED DUDA will be decided by FREYBERG but operation will NOT repeat NOT begin until FREYBERG is certain it has maximum chance of success. Zero will be signalled by FREYBERG to me by code-word fullback followed by time giving hour's notice. I will pass it on to SCOBIE. SCOBIE will co-operate by engaging enemy batteries located west of ED DUDA. Subject to its NOT rpt NOT weakening SCOBIE'S power to join forces with FREYBERG SCOBIE will create diversion [which] will be decided by SCOBIE on receipt zero for ED DUDA attack from FREYBERG. When TOBRUK - SIDI REZEGH - ED DUDA corridor firmly established advance will be made to TOBRUK - EL ADEM road under my direction. Ground recognition signals between tps of FREYBERG and SCOBIE will be a succession of green Verey lights. FREYBERG and SCOBIE will signal earliest possible most profitable targets for (air?) attack in connection these operations. Speed essential but certainty vital.

There followed a sharp and unexpected distraction. Apprehensions aroused by the constant air raids in Greece and Crete had dissolved in the course of a week of obvious RAF supremacy over the New Zealand part of the battlefield, and the decreasing depth of slit trenches reflected growing confidence on this score. When seventeen Stukas flew over about 4 p.m. they attracted few nervous glances and even the Bofors guns were slow to open fire. Some bombs fell on 4 Brigade, but

Divisional Headquarters astride the Trigh Capuzzo north-east of Point 175 was the chief target and bombs burst near G Office and among several attached headquarters, and also in the centre of 1 Army Tank Brigade about half a mile to the east. The worst hit was Headquarters of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, which had four killed; the army tank brigade had two killed and two wounded and suffered damage to its ACV ², and all told there were seven killed and twenty wounded. Seven or eight vehicles were set on fire or otherwise badly damaged, and as Freyberg noted in his diary, many men decided that their 'slit trenches were neither deep enough nor broad enough'.

¹ Corrupt group as received by NZ Div.

² Armoured Command Vehicle, then issued only to armoured formations (though Rommel and Cruewell each used one captured in the initial advance of DAK some months before).

Sixth Brigade was not bombed and had the best view of what developed into the greatest air encounter of the campaign. Two RAF fighter squadrons came upon twenty twin-engined German aircraft, either Me110s or Ju88s, at 11,000 feet and a strong force of Italian G50s and five other fighters escorting Stukas at a lower level, with a few Me109Fs as 'top cover' at 13,000 feet. Though heavily outnumbered the British fighters at once attacked, 3 Squadron, RAAF, going for the twin-engined aircraft and 112 Squadron, RAF, tackling the G50s and driving them into a defensive circle. Four of the twin-engined planes, two G50s and one Me109F were claimed by 258 Wing, with several others probably destroyed or damaged in return for 'four Pilots missing'; altogether ten enemy aircraft were claimed to have been shot down, with three more 'probables' and eight damaged, two of those destroyed being Fieseler Storch aircraft spotting for the bombers, For 23 fighters tackling 60–80 enemy aircraft, even on the smaller estimate the action was strikingly successful and the pilots were particularly pleased to see troops on the ground give evidence of 'wild enthusiasm' as they watched the dogfights. Tributes later came in from 'the New Zealand Forces' and from Air Vice-Marshal Coningham himself. The RAF, however, was making its largest contribution to the battle by bombing the enemy in the frontier area this day, and it was a matter of luck that these two squadrons

arrived on the scene when the New Zealand Division was dive-bombed.

Because the [RAF](#) was attacking the panzer forces threatening the forward landing grounds, it was quite unable to provide this day the bomber support which Godwin-Austen had promised [Freyberg](#). Several requests by 4 Brigade for air attack on 'excellent' targets in the Ed Duda and [Belhamed](#) areas therefore had to be refused. A naval officer from Corps came in at 3.50 p.m., however, to discuss details of a naval bombardment planned for this night, probably on the enemy artillery just east of [Tobruk](#).

With or without this support, [Freyberg](#) had already decided he should break through to Ed Duda by first light on 26 November and had signalled to 13 Corps at 1.15 p.m. that he expected to be on a line from there to Point 178 on the southern escarpment by that time. This meant that 21 Battalion would have to make up ground to the west to a depth of about four miles and that the rest of 6 Brigade would have to seize the whole of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment and then press on to Ed Duda, while 4 Brigade took [Belhamed](#), where stronger resistance was expected. But this was before Godwin-Austen's order was received that though speed was essential certainty was 'vital'.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 14 – SUCCESS AT BELHAMED; FAILURE AT SIDI REZEGH

CHAPTER 14

Success at Belhamed; Failure at Sidi Rezegh

i

AS planning progressed it soon became clear that the programme to occupy all three escarpments at once was too ambitious and the southern one could not be included in the scheme. A daylight advance was out of the question, as the diarist of I Army Tank Brigade explains:

There was insufficient infantry to enable properly prepared day attacks with adequate supporting fire to be staged. Tanks alone could not attack in daylight without serious casualties and therefore new methods had to be tried.

The 'new method' chosen was to advance by night across up to eight miles of unknown ground, not knowing where or when opposition would be met and relying on New Zealand Bren and Tommy guns, bayonets and grenades to overcome it.

[Freyberg](#) opened a conference with his brigadiers in the early evening of 25 November by stating that the Division must occupy all the features overlooking the break-out area ([Belhamed](#), Rezegh and Ed Duda) and the [Tobruk](#) garrison would then come out and join forces. He wanted the advance to start as soon as possible and signalled to Corps at 5.35 p.m. as follows:

TOBRUCH garrison is making a sortie after NZ Div has captured the ED DUDA posn. This sortie will probably take place morning 26 Nov. INTENTION NZ Div will attack and capture BELHAMED ED DUDA SIDE REZEGH. METHOD Objectives 4 Inf Bde BELHAMED leaving one bn [ZAAFRAN](#) 6 Inf Bde SIDI REZEGH and ED DUDA. Zero hr 2100 hrs. Consolidate on objective. Div Res one sqn R TKS area 442406 [south-east of [Zaafran](#)]. Div H.Q. and H.Q. 4 Inf remain present posns. H.Q. 6 Inf Bde SIDI REZEGH. Ground recognition sigs between our Tps and Tps from TOBRUCH will be succession green Very lights.

How the I tanks might be used to support the night attack was discussed with Brigadier Watkins, who was willing to commit them behind the infantry but did not want them exposed to enemy fire at first light; by that time he wanted them tucked

away out of sight but ready to counter-attack if required. All that the conference settled, however, was that 44 Royal Tanks would be in support of 4 Brigade, B Squadron, 8 Royal Tanks, in support of 6 Brigade, and A Squadron in Divisional Reserve. The details were left to Inglis and Barrowclough in consultation with the tank officers concerned. In discussion later that night with Lieutenant-Colonel Gentry, however, Freyberg disclosed a view of the operation quite different from that of the Army Commander and significantly different from Godwin-Austen's. 'We have to get in and join with Tobruk', he said. 'I have no doubts whatever that we have to go in, but we may have to go in tomorrow night'. By this he meant that the Division would have to turn about when it linked with the garrison and face outwards to meet the inevitable counter-attacks, joining and reinforcing the garrison in a perimeter that would then command the bottleneck between Ed Duda and Sidi Rezegh. At least in the first instance, this would in no sense constitute the relief of Tobruk, as many of those concerned imagined it would.

ii

The various reports of enemy in front of 4 Brigade and the comparative absence of such reports from 6 Brigade seem to have built up the impression that Inglis faced a harder task than Barrowclough, and the fact that he was given two I-tank squadrons to Barrowclough's one lends support to this. But Inglis had a straight advance to make of about three miles over fairly flat ground, whereas Barrowclough had to seize several miles of escarpment indented with innumerable inlets and wadis and then swing half-right and carry on for three or four miles to Ed Duda, all in the hours of darkness. There were many details to settle and much work to be done before either brigade could start, and for 6 Brigade the zero hour of 9 p.m. was far too early.

The German supply troops near Belhamed had given 4 Brigade Headquarters a false impression of strength and when Inglis came back from the conference Bassett was 'alarmed'; 'I'd checked on hordes of Boche stacking up in thousands in that area', he wrote later. A warning order had already gone out to battalions that they would have to make a night attack and the orders group was quickly assembled. 'Inglis's orders were short and to the point', Kippenberger wrote. '18 and 20 Battalions were to seize and hold Belhamed, I was to be in command, make the

arrangements, and continue to command on the hill after its capture.... There was no question of artillery support; it had to be a straightforward night attack with the bayonet.' ¹ The guns were to fire 'a series of harassing fire tasks before and during the early stages of the advance' ² and then a few bursts at intervals to indicate the objective. The supporting I tanks

¹ Letter, 15 Jan 1942.

² Duff.

plus 46 Field Battery, 31 Anti-Tank Battery, and a troop of 41 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery were to move forward in one group at 4 a.m. so as to be close up to the forward infantry at first light, while V/AA Field Battery from its present positions would bring down fire as directed by its FOOs travelling in the tanks.

An operation order of 18 Battalion, signed at 6.25 p.m., gave details, many of which must also have applied to 20 Battalion. The two battalions were to assemble on a line then being marked out with tape along existing FDLs, with the 18th on the right and the 20th on the left, each on a frontage of 300 yards with two companies forward and two 300 yards behind. Essential transport and mortar platoons would come forward in the morning with the I tanks. The axis of advance was just north of due west and the speed of advance 100 yards every two minutes.

[Kippenberger](#) moved among his men assembled for the attack and told them what he intended: 'we are going forward tonight to take [Belhamed](#) and open the way to [Tobruk](#). This is the crisis of the battle. We have 6000 yards to go and after 4000 yards we will have to fight our way. We will go straight in with bayonet and bomb and nothing will stop us....' ¹ Then he went over to Brigade Headquarters, meaning to move with Lieutenant-Colonel Peart; ² but the two lost sight of each other in the dark. It was 10 p.m. before the battalions got away, with fair visibility which decreased as the moon went down. ³

For the men in the lead the approach march seemed endless. 'I think most of us were pretty well done in when we actually got into the real thing', a private of 18 Battalion writes. ⁴ 'Even then we saw nothing but tracer which seemed to pass us by

on all sides. The noise was terrific with most of us yelling our heads off.' C Company of the 18th was on the right and A on the left, with D behind C and B to the left rear. The war diary says, 'Bn heavily engaged by MG fire', and a private recorded in his pocket diary that 'Jerry bullets shot all over the joint by the hundreds'⁵ and the handle of the shovel he was carrying was shot away. But the fire was mostly wild and caused few casualties and the battalion was soon on [Belhamed](#), with C and D Companies along the top of the escarpment and A and B forming a front to the west. Battalion Headquarters was set up in pitch darkness just south-west of Point 154 and before midnight sent a message to Brigade that the objective was taken.

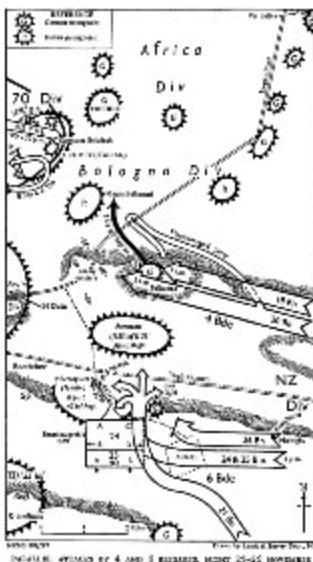
¹ Letter, 15 Jan 1942.

² Lt-Col J. N. Peart, DSO, m.i.d.; born [Collingwood](#), 12 Feb 1900; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn Nov 1941–Mar 1942; 26 Bn 1 May–20 Jun 1942, 29 Jun–4 Sep 1942; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

³ The moon set at 12 minutes past midnight.

⁴ R. B. Joyes.

⁵ S. G. Winters.



PARALLEL ATTACKS BY 4 AND 6 BRIGADES, NIGHT 25-6 NOVEMBER

Much the same occurred on the left, where the 20th found the enemy panicky and firing too high 'as if they were head down in slit trenches, pulling the trigger plenty', though light anti-tank guns were also in action until their crews were 'dealt with very promptly with the bayonet'.¹ A large measure of surprise had evidently been achieved on [Belhamed](#) itself; but the enemy was in far greater strength to the south, between there and [Sidi Rezegh](#), and those on the extreme left crossed the flank of this position and passed 'row upon row of MGs' and 'just went straight thro' everything.'² An officer of A Company who was wounded spoke to Bassett at the RAP later of his men 'cheering and cursing as they swept up the hill through the second line'.³ Behind them Signals linesmen found it hard to keep direction in their trucks and seemed to be surrounded by enemy whose cross-fire made their tasks difficult and dangerous. Second-Lieutenant [Wilson](#)⁴ of D Company says, 'my own PI went forward with cries of "Otago" and giving no quarter'.

The 18th settled down on the eastern half of the feature and the 20th to the west. In the absence of [Kippenberger](#), who could not be found, Major [Mitchell](#)⁵ assumed command of the latter and disposed the companies with C on the right and half D on the left facing west, the other half of D and B facing south, and A in reserve. Digging was hard and unrewarding. A private of B Company says of the consolidation, 'We did so by picking out slabs of rock and piling them up, as we thought, between us and the enemy.' However, 'At daylight we soon found out that the enemy was in a different direction.'

It was when he came upon the Tobruk By-pass that [Kippenberger](#), with a small HQ party and two lorries, realised he had gone astray and began to retrace his steps. He had veered to the right and had gone far beyond his objective. After only a few yards he could hear 'sounds of voices and hurrying feet across the road under the escarpment' and sent off Lieutenant [Baker](#)⁶ with his LAA Platoon to investigate. A brief burst of firing and then loud shouts began to awake the neighbourhood and Baker came back with some eighty calm prisoners and his own very excited men. The party nevertheless got back safely with the prisoners to where 18 Battalion was digging in.

¹ Lt N. McPhail.

² 2 Lt E. M. Wilson.

³ Capt J. F. Phillips.

⁴ Capt E. M. Wilson; Timaru; born Morton Mains, Southland, 18 Sep 1910; civil servant; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped, Italy, Sep 1943; recaptured in Yugoslavia.

⁵ Maj T. H. Mitchell; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 9 Dec 1904; electrical engineer; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁶ Maj G. Baker; Gore; born Hastings, 21 May 1919; stock agent; wounded 18 Nov 1941.

All fighting had stopped [Kippenberger wrote on 15 January 1942]—18th had not lost many they thought. I moved off to find the 20th. The night was bitterly cold—soon we came to the area 20th should have been in and came upon many dead and some helplessly wounded. For two hours we searched but I think just went round in circles and about one we stopped and huddled up together to wait for dawn. There was no sleep and the wind went through us while from all about, near and far, sounded the cries of wounded men, Germans calling 'RAP'.

The companies of the 20th had pushed on farther to the west across a shallow depression which did not appear on the map; but for the moment there was no sound of further fighting and Kippenberger therefore wrote out a brief report and sent it back to Brigade:

Position taken after some hard fighting. I became separated and am at present bivouacked with a party of Sappers & sundry & about 100 prisoners on objective just S of Peart.

After much wandering I think the position is that 18th are on the objective but haven't gone far enough & 20th have gone too far. I can't find them anyway.

There are a lot of casualties about & I think they must have passed through.

Tell Pikes ¹ to be careful in morning, not to shoot up either 20th or my party.
My party is identifiable by having 2–3 tonners & a mob of prisoners.

(Sgd) H. K. Kippenberger Lt Col
0110 hrs

This estimate of position is verified at the moment by sound of fighting ahead.

Captain Copeland, ² a Brigade LO attached to 20 Battalion, took this back with Sergeant Allison, ³ who describes the journey back as a 'terribly eerie trip—lots of screaming from wounded and dying men', which suggests that the attackers had made liberal use of the bayonet.

At Brigade Headquarters Inglis, Bassett, Duff and the IO, Beale, ⁴ all listened anxiously throughout the night on a party line and at first heard only the rather alarming reports of the linesmen. Then one or two wounded came in to the nearby RAP, after which there was anxious silence until 5 a.m.' ⁵, when Copeland brought Kippenberger's message.

The 44th Royal Tanks and supporting arms set off at 6 a.m., 26 November, but did not get far before a message from 4 Brigade was passed on to Captain Pike which made him hold up the group for nearly an hour until he could get his orders clarified:

¹ i.e., the tanks and supporting arms (Capt Pike of 44 R Tks was to lead this group).

² Lt-Col A. D. Copeland, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 3 Feb 1912; civil servant; wounded 29 May 1944.

³ Sgt E. S. Allison; England; born Scotland, 16 May 1918; student teacher; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

⁴ Maj J. H. Beale, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born England, 3 Apr 1912; salesman.

⁵ Bassett.

To 44 RTR

46 Bty NZA

LT COL KIPPENBERGER

(1) 18 & 20 Bns on objective.

(2) 6 Bde NOT yet on ED DUDA & daylight attack necessary.

(3) DIV orders us to support this attack BOTH by guns & tanks—in absence of further orders from Div, independent action. You will act accordingly.

(4) Pockets of Boche on North under side of escarpment South of Trigh Capuzzo to be winkled out by tanks.

46 Bty will support 6 Bde & 4 Bde will be supported by guns from this posn.

26 Nov 41 (Sgd) B. I. Bassett Capt

0545 BM

The situation was not nearly as simple, however, as this made it sound. A daylight attack by 6 Brigade across to Ed Duda was out of the question, as [Divisional Headquarters](#) soon learned. At 7 a.m. 4 Brigade was told that this attack would be 'postponed until tonight' ¹ and the tanks and guns could therefore concentrate on defending [Belhamed](#). The ground between there and [Sidi Rezegh](#) was expected to be undefended; but it actually contained a very strong German position which soon made its presence felt. [Belhamed](#) itself had been defended only by a weak company of German engineers, the remnants of which still held out on the saddle to the north-west; but the enemy to the south was formidable and 'winkling out' enemy in the wrinkles of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment was no task for the unaided Matildas of 44 Royal Tanks. For the time being there was little 4 and 6 Brigades could do to help each other. What had been conceived as a joint operation of the two moving forward abreast and rolling up all the enemy positions between them had turned out quite differently.

Nor were 4 Brigade and [Divisional Headquarters](#) better informed about the [Tobruk](#) garrison than they were about the enemy, and so they had no knowledge of a 'diversion' which Scobie provided this night intending to help them. This took the form of attacks on 'Wrecked Plane' on the northern shoulder of the break-out area and 'Wolf' (now renamed 'Grumpy') to the east, which if successful would widen the area and make the final advance to Ed Duda all the easier. A combined tank-and-infantry attack on 'Wrecked Plane' met heavy opposition but overran two important sangars and 'wiped out' a sizable German patrol, getting near enough to the main position to neutralise its fire next day. 'Grumpy' was taken by 10.30 p.m., however, with 150 prisoners, at a cost of five tanks disabled on mines, and the infantry consolidated there, well under

¹ 4 Bde diary.

three miles from 20 Battalion at [Belhamed](#) and less than two miles from the farthest point [Kippenberger's](#) party reached. A link-up between the two divisions might easily have been made this night in the [Magen Belhamed](#) area had they been in direct wireless contact. But Godwin-Austen had been so specific about Ed Duda that there was no thought of joining hands anywhere else.

iii

The heavy opposition expected by 4 Brigade had not been met; but even Barrowclough's stern view of the difficulties which faced 6 Brigade rated them far too low. He thought when he was given it that his task was 'formidable':

Sufficient was known of the enemy strength at [SIDI REZEGH](#) to make it perfectly clear that the place would not be won without a stern fight. After it was taken a substantial force had to advance a further three miles to ED DUDA and engage an enemy garrison about whose strength and composition we had not the slightest information. ¹

In strict truth nothing was known even of the enemy at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and all Barrowclough could do was to assume from fighting thus far that resistance would probably continue on much the same scale as he pushed on westwards. The plan he

formulated as he hurried back from Division in the evening of 25 November was to despatch Shuttleworth with 24 and 25 Battalions westwards to form a box above Sidi Rezegh through which Page with 21 and 26 Battalions would pass on the way to Ed Duda. There Page would consolidate as the situation allowed. Supporting arms would follow as soon as they could get through. Both groups would take up all-round defensive positions to meet any counter-attacks which developed next day.

This seemed simple; but when the details were worked out it was in fact most complicated, particularly in the face of the opposition disclosed in the course of the advance. The lack of sufficient time to carry out the preliminaries was a severe handicap. Allen had to get back to 21 Battalion, embus, make an approach march in the dark over six miles of strange ground, and then form up with 26 Battalion, pass through the box, descend the escarpment near the Mosque, cover another three miles of desert not guaranteed to be free of enemy, then attack jointly with Page a feature which was almost sure to be strongly defended, and be in position there by first light to meet counter-attack.

Knowing there was no time to waste, Barrowclough when he got back to 6 Brigade at once called up the commanders of the various supporting arms and began to brief them, pending the arrival of the battalion commanders. With remarkable clarity and precision

¹ Report in 6 Bde diary.

of thought he gave out orders filling in all foreseeable details of the many moves to be made and the allocation of supporting weapons, medical services, and transport, timings, communications, code signals, and even the rations to be carried. Each of these in practice, however, had its own set of complications and its pressing limitations of time. The Intelligence Officer tried to get it all down in writing, and the allocation of artillery and Vickers guns, according to his notes, was as follows:

Arty: EL DUDA garrison

12 2 pdrs and 8 25 pdrs

SIDI RESEGH—4 2 pdrs 16 25 pdrs 4 18 pdrs.

O.C. 6 Fd Regt to arrange for F.O.O's to accompany EL DUDA garrison if thought advisable.

AA. Arty 3 guns EL DUDA
5 guns SIDI RESEGH

M.M.G's one pl EL DUDA
two pls SIDI RESEGH

Weir and his assistants would evidently have to do some quick thinking and the various gun detachments some hasty and accurate navigation in the dark to assemble at various rendezvous and take their proper places in the order of march or attack.

Major Burton was strolling across from the new position occupied by 25 Battalion in the late afternoon to check arrangements with 26 Battalion ahead when he first received word of the conference. Not knowing where Brigade Headquarters was, he carried on towards Page's headquarters, hoping to find out, and came upon Page himself, who drove him to the conference. Burton had already given his unit a code-word which meant 'Prepare to move' and knew his headquarters would act promptly if this word came through. When they reached Brigade Headquarters Barrowclough was still briefing the commanders of supporting arms and services and the four battalion commanders had to wait. As Burton describes it:

It was dark and bitterly cold. Col Shuttleworth (24 Bn) and Col Page (26 Bn) sat in the front seat of the car ... and I perched in the back seat to try and keep warm. The wait was long and tiring.

At last the Brig calls for inf comds and as we enter his command truck, he apologised for the delay in calling us. There was not much time to spare and very briefly we were told of the tasks which were ours for the night.

This must have been about 7 p.m., leaving very little time, and when Burton pointed out that it was impossible to be ready south of the Blockhouse by 8 p.m. the time was put back an hour. It was left to Page and Shuttleworth to work out further details of the moves of their two groups and the conference broke up.

Before he left Burton got the Brigade Signals to send his codeword, and when he got back he found preparations well advanced. Twenty-fifth Battalion had its transport in a central column with marching troops on either side and a protective screen in front, the carriers bringing up the rear. In this order he reached the Blockhouse by the appointed time, but it was about 11 p.m. before 24 Battalion was ready to start.

Shuttleworth had in the meantime decided to march due west with his own 24 Battalion from a starting line south of the Block-house to the area south of Point 162 on the far side of the airfield, with 25 Battalion following. In the new area his A and C Companies would extend 2000 yards westwards and then face north with C on the right and A on the left, each across 1000 yards of front, with the right of C opposite Point 162 and perhaps 2000 yards south of the escarpment. Then the two companies would advance in line almost to the edge, clearing an area 2000 yards square. Finally A Company would send forward a detachment to ensure that the route down to the flat below was also clear. Meanwhile 25 Battalion would extend along the original 2000-yard line but facing south, thus forming the southern flank. What was intended for the eastern and western sides of the box is not known for sure: one account says the western side was to be left open; another says that B Company of 24 Battalion was to guard it and D Company the eastern side; a third says that both B and D were to form the eastern side facing west, which does not seem to make sense but corresponds better than the other two with what in fact took place.

Page did not intend, as Shuttleworth did, to remain in direct command of his own battalion and appointed Major Mathewson to take his place while he commanded the group as a whole. ¹ His battalion was widely dispersed from south of the Blockhouse to the eastern fringe of the airfield, and in the end he decided to form up behind Shuttleworth's group and follow it. But this was an impossible route for 21 Battalion, which had to cross six miles of desert at night and could not afford to get tangled up in the Rugbet. Page therefore told Allen to make straight for [Sidi Rezegh](#). To save time he thought Allen might descend the escarpment there as soon as Brigade ordered Phase Two, the advance to Ed Duda, to start, and Page would take 26 Battalion down to the Trigh Capuzzo by whatever routes lay at hand, forming up with Allen north of the Mosque for the final advance.

Weir had a hard task at this stage sorting out the various gun groups and getting them where they were needed. In the haste of

¹ An appointment even more temporary than Page intended; for Mathewson was badly wounded and his driver killed by a mine near the Blockhouse and [Maj T. Milliken](#) took over.

planning the fact that 47 Field Battery was still with 21 Battalion was overlooked and Weir decided to leave it with Allen. He attached his 48 Battery to 26 Battalion and the rest of 6 Field Regiment was to move forward to [Sidi Rezegh](#) en masse with transport before daylight. There were fewer 2-pounders, however, than the brigade plan provided for, as all troops were not at full strength. The troop of 65 Anti-Tank Regt, RA, which came in during the day was put under Shuttleworth's command, together with K Troop of 33 Battery, each with only three guns. How the other 2-pounders and the Bofors were to be allotted is not known; but planning and reality in any case soon diverged greatly. Nos. 7 and 9 Platoons of 3 MG Company were to be allotted to Shuttleworth and No. 8 Platoon to Page; but here again the treachery of circumstance decided otherwise.

For the first three miles 24 Battalion went well with A Company leading, C following, B and D on a parallel route to the south and the transport between the two groups. At the appointed place they began to open out to form the box as planned. No enemy had been met and A and C Companies began their advance northwards in good order. This they mostly maintained despite heavy fire in places and the loss of a number of men. But defensive fire thickened up and mortars and artillery joined in as the troops began digging in stony ground. A Niue Islander with C Company, for example, says he did not come under fire until after digging in—'picks and shovels sounding all over the desert'—but the fire carried on for the rest of the night. ¹

Captains [Forder](#) ² of A Company and Tomlinson of C had arranged to consult each other before setting out northwards so that their companies would keep in touch throughout. But as Forder says, 'in the darkness it was impossible to maintain contact' and he could not find Tomlinson. He did, however, come upon the platoon of 3 MG Company which was to cover the north-western corner of the box and for

perhaps half the distance the vehicles of this platoon travelled with him. Then 'quite heavy' small-arms and anti-tank fire broke out and the machine-gun officer went off to the left to take up his position while A Company pushed on northwards. Forder found his men 'clearing up numerous pockets of Italians (Bersaglieri)' some of whom 'fought extremely well firing from their positions until accounted for by grenades and Tommy guns'. Others, however, were only too anxious to surrender and a fairly large party of 'very frightened Italians' was 'gathered in' but could not yet be sent back to the rear. In Forder's neighbourhood his men reached

¹ W. Japeth.

² Capt R. H. Forder, ED; Auckland; born London, 13 Jan 1906; solicitor; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

the appointed line and began to dig in in the few places where this was possible, and where it was not they constructed sangars which gave some cover. When heavy fire came down on this position many of the Italians were killed; but few of A Company were hit.

One casualty, however, was Second-Lieutenant Cutler ¹ of 7 Platoon, whose men had struck much opposition. He had had a hard job 'rallying and directing' them as they 'charged shouting, probing and firing at anything movable', as one private describes it; ² then he was killed instantly and the platoon carried on with only a vague idea of what was expected of it. There had been no time for detailed briefing, several changes of direction had been made on the way, and the corporal who now took charge ³ consulted those around him and had to decide on a line of advance. By a stroke of luck the one chosen proved to be correct. The platoon managed to mop up several more enemy posts without further loss and then came upon 8 Platoon on the right and began to dig in alongside it. This seems to have been somewhere near the crest of the escarpment south-west of the Mosque. By first light 7 Platoon had lost another man killed and two more wounded, much the same as the other platoons of A Company. C Company had an easier passage northwards and went into position on the right of A Company without much trouble. Forder of A then sent a 'small party' down the track leading past the Mosque and this came back and

reported it clear of enemy. A runner was sent back to Shuttleworth to tell him this and the first phase of the attack seemed to have been carried out very much as ordered. Neither Forder nor Tomlinson realised at this stage that the enemy was strongly posted in the rock-strewn crest of the escarpment just in front of them and in the many wadis which cut into it for some distance to the east.

The southern side of the box was formed almost exactly according to plan, with A Company of 25 Battalion on the right facing south and B on the left, each covering 800 yards of front, and Headquarters Company in the centre extended over 400 yards, though A was 'considerably mixed up with troops of the 24 Bn', according to Major Burton. He could hear enemy fire and could see the enemy anti-tank-gun bullets and tracer bullets from small arms flying through the air to the north and therefore stressed that his men should take up all-round defensive positions. In the centre the men struck clay and could dig deeply, but the flanks were stony and the trenches of A and B Companies therefore shallow. As the fighting to the north continued Burton began to worry about the transport

¹ 2 Lt J. G. Cutler; born NZ 2 Mar 1916; law clerk; killed in action 25 Nov 1941.

² G. H. Logan.

³ F. Marshall.

and decided in the end to disperse it as much as possible and get the drivers to dig in ready to fight in case 24 Battalion failed to secure the northern flank. Near Burton's headquarters Signals dug a deep pit for the wireless set to Brigade and duly installed it. To most of the men it seemed that they were to be no more than 'car park guards' for the rest of the brigade ¹ and they were more concerned with the penetrating cold of the early morning than with what the enemy might do.

Back in the Blockhouse area 26 Battalion did its best to assemble the companies and supporting arms it had to take to Ed Duda, and unlike Shuttleworth's group it could not leave the sorting-out until dawn. Some of the field guns got mixed up with

the wrong column of transport, that which was to stay at [Sidi Rezegh](#); but by midnight all elements were assembled in fair order and soon after this the battalion moved forward rather closer to the escarpment than 24 Battalion had been. The ground there was rougher and the now alert enemy more numerous and closer at hand. Page in the haste of his briefing had gained the mistaken impression that Shuttleworth was to clear the escarpment along the whole of its length westwards to beyond the Mosque, so this opposition came very much as a surprise. As he got closer to the box fire from the right became intense and pinned several detachments to the ground. Page was well forward and could see that there was some confusion ahead among Shuttleworth's men, and when he heard a false report from Brigade by wireless that 24 Battalion was still 1000 yards short of the Mosque he had no reason to doubt it. He could therefore do nothing but wait, hoping that Shuttleworth would soon complete his mission so that the second phase could start.

The haste and the darkness bred other misapprehensions, too, and it is not surprising that when Lieutenant-Colonel Allen got the warning order to move to the rendezvous with 26 Battalion at [Sidi Rezegh](#) he took it that this meant he was to set out to attack Ed Duda. The difficult drive to the box, starting at midnight, entailed several changes of direction in the dark over uneven ground, but it went off remarkably well and the battalion reached the escarpment above the Mosque in fair order. But Allen found neither a guide from 26 Battalion nor Shuttleworth, and when he checked by R/T with Brigade he gathered in a conversation much marred by 'static' that he was to go ahead as planned. ² He assembled his companies on foot with the vehicles directly behind and advanced with B on

¹ A. G. Reed.

² Alen went so conscientiously through the long procedure for identifying himself that contact was lost before Barrowclough had time to tell him what he wanted. He may also have spoken to Page; but R/T was a poor channel of communications at night and caused much misunderstanding.

the right, D in the centre and C on the left to clear the escarpment far enough on both sides of the track down past the Mosque to allow a safe passage for the

vehicles which must get through to Ed Duda.

This was certainly not what Barrowclough had intended. In the various expressions used to describe the objective of Shuttleworth's group—'box', 'perimeter', 'garrison at [Sidi Rezegh](#)' and 'corridor', to name a few—the purpose of clearing the way for Page's group was lost. Instead of using the combined strength of 24 and 25 Battalions to clear the [Sidi Rezegh](#) area and secure the escarpment there to let Page's group through to Ed Duda, which was what Barrowclough wished, Shuttleworth's force did no more than establish itself south of this area and send a patrol down the track past the Mosque. When this patrol got through in the dark and returned with a favourable report, nothing more was done to help Page, though only two of Shuttleworth's six rifle companies had any direct contact with the enemy. To clear the escarpment here before going on to attack Ed Duda was too much for Allen's companies; yet there was nothing else he could do if he was to keep his rendezvous with Page.

About 150 yards from where they dismounted the forward infantry of the 21st passed through the northern side of Shuttleworth's box, mainly in Tomlinson's area. Then a party including C Company, the pioneer platoon and Headquarters of 21 Battalion crossed the track near Point 162 and descended the escarpment to the flat below, south of the Trigh Capuzzo. This party then swung left and advanced parallel to the escarpment and 'met MG fire—cleared up several posts', according to the adjutant, [Dutton](#).¹ The whole battalion, instead of moving astride the track down the slope and past the Mosque, had gone east of this. Part of D Company descended the slopes nearby, met no enemy, and went straight ahead across the Trigh, where it settled down until the rest of the unit appeared. But heavy fighting had broken out where B Company and the rest of D tried to descend. Many sections, indeed, got nowhere near the top and were held down by defensive fire of all kinds which swept the approaches. A Company and the supporting arms had followed through and the field guns reached the lip of the escarpment before coming under fire which threatened disaster. Major [Beattie](#)² of 47 Battery therefore withdrew south-eastwards to find reasonable cover before dawn. Other vehicles fled at dangerous speed through 25 Battalion to escape enemy fire, running over several men of that unit and destroying the wireless set which had been dug in with

¹ [Capt G. A. Dutton](#); Katikati; born [Stirling](#), 27 Jun 1910; school teacher; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

² [Lt-Col R. R. Beattie](#); born NZ 24 Sep 1908; warehouseman; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

great care. Communications broke down completely and 21 Battalion was at this stage a number of detachments, none larger than a company and all acting independently and dispersed over a considerable area north and south of the escarpment, with no hope of attacking Ed Duda and every reason for anxiety about what daylight would reveal. None were dug in and some were much closer than they thought to strong enemy positions.

About 5 a.m. Page was in touch with Barrowclough and 'with the approval of Div HQ' cancelled Phase Two of the operation, though he had no way of passing this decision on to Allen. He now resumed direct command of his own battalion and put his C and D Companies into position on the right of 24 Battalion facing north and north-west, where the men dug down or built sangars as best they could. The transport was sent for safety to a large wadi north of the airfield. [Divisional Headquarters](#) in acquiescing had pointed out that 4 Brigade had gained Belhamed and expressed the hope that 6 Brigade would be equally secure in possession of the whole of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment by first light. This hope, as Barrowclough says, was 'not fully realised'. ¹ The enemy still held much of the escarpment in strength, there was another strong position between the Trigh Capuzzo and [Belhamed](#), and reinforcements were being brought in from the west accompanied by tanks. Dawn of 26 November would be a sad and painful one for 6 Brigade, with many regrets and few consolations.

iv

The Divisional staff had done its best to follow the fortunes of both brigade attacks during the night and by 3.30 a.m. understood that 6 Brigade had captured [Sidi Rezegh](#) and was 'now on the way to ED DUDA', and despite some obscurity it seemed that [Belhamed](#) was captured. A signal to this effect was therefore sent to

Corps. Another at 5.10 a.m. on the 26th contradicted this, pointing out that [Belhamed](#) was 'firmly in our hands' but 'Much opposition' was still being met at Rezegh and the attack on Ed Duda had not yet started. By that time the Ed Duda operation was out of the question and at 5.40 a.m. Division signalled 6 Brigade as follows:

Consolidate on SIDI REZEGH. Make a plan to attack ED DUDA but do NOT attack until ordered to do so.

In a situation report at 9 a.m. on the 26th, received at Division at 9.40, Barrowclough explained the situation as he knew it and disclosed that he meant to hold [Sidi Rezegh](#) with 26 Battalion on the right facing north, 24 Battalion in the centre, and 21 Battalion on the left, a scheme which could not be fully realised until he

¹ Report in the 6 Bde diary.

got in touch with 21 Battalion. All he knew of the 21st was that 47 Field Battery had been unable to keep in touch and that at 7 a.m. Captain Ferguson reported in with A Company, 50-strong, and said that 'the Bn had been very heavily attacked just beyond [SIDI REZEGH](#) and in the confusion scattered'. The report concluded thus:

At the present moment the situation is that the tps on [SIDI REZEGH](#) are disorganised, and re-organisation is not easy, as they are being subjected to mortar and machine gun fire. All attempts to locate Col. ALLEN have so far failed and it is feared that he may be a casualty. At the present moment no serious enemy attack is developing against us, though he is sniping with rifle and MG fire very consistently.

This still did not make it clear to Division that 6 Brigade had by no means succeeded even in capturing [Sidi Rezegh](#), and for some time [Freyberg](#) assumed that that area was in New Zealand hands except for a few isolated pockets. As he noted in his diary, '4 Bde reached [Belhamed](#) in dawn attack with 18 and 20 Bns', and '6 Bde reached Resegh'. He added that 'Fighting has been extremely tough and our

successes have cost us casualties'. When 6 Brigade 'found Resegh strongly held' he was not unduly perturbed and 'we decided it was unsound to go forward to Ed Duda'. He was expecting the [Tobruk](#) garrison, again by a misunderstanding, to complete its sortie at the same time and commented that ' [Tobruk](#) have failed to come out because of the condition, no doubt, that we must be first on Ed Duda'. Neither he nor Gentry was greatly worried about the failure to get to Ed Duda, thinking at first that a daylight attack by 6 Brigade would complete the link with 70 Division, ¹ though as the day advanced it became increasingly obvious that Barrowclough had quite enough on his hands at [Sidi Rezegh](#).

Though units were warned that supplies had been 'temporarily interrupted', there was every confidence that 22 Armoured Brigade would be able to deal with any threat from the south or rear, and when a message came in that '400 MET ² and some tanks' were moving north-west from the Gabr Saleh area this was passed on without comment to Brigadier Scott-Cockburn, who happened to visit [Divisional Headquarters](#) at 9.50 a.m. Scott-Cockburn saw [Freyberg](#) and gave an account of his situation:

He is protecting our L of C with his 46 tanks out of 150 and Armd Cars. A patchwork quilt was how he described his force 'but keen and in good heart—4 Yeomanry Regts'. Discussed posn of other Armd Bdes—4 and 7 Armd Bdes at Bir Gobi doing maintenance, about 100 strong altogether at present. 1 SA Bde is on the L of C. Talking of the use of tanks, the Brig said 'I quite agree tanks can't go for A Tk guns unsupported'. ³

¹ Hence the signal from 4 Bde to [Kippenberger](#) and others of 5.45 a.m. See p. 255.

² Mechanised enemy transport.

³ [Freyberg's](#) diary.

This statement, which had to be taken at its face value, was highly misleading and gave a false sense of security regarding the southern flank. Of the two armoured

brigades thought to be at El Gubi, one was many miles away and the other had been withdrawn from the campaign. With this assurance, however, [Freyberg](#) and his staff turned their attention to [Belhamed](#), where 4 Brigade was getting much attention from enemy guns and mortars.

As early as 6.20 a.m. Division had signalled Air Support Control asking for bombing of the enemy artillery in the Bu Amud area north of [Belhamed](#). Then an operation order of Boettcher Group of 10.30 p.m., 25 November, captured during the night, was translated and for the first time the Division had a reasonably reliable indication of the enemy it faced. Boettcher's 104 Artillery Command faced east with II Battalion, 155 Infantry Regiment, on its right, the southern escarpment, 9 Bersaglieri Regiment on the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, and I Battalion, 155 Infantry Regiment, on its left, east of a line between [Belhamed](#) and the Rugbet en-Nbeidat. These dispositions had of course been modified by the operations of 4 and 6 Brigades during the night and there had been reports of reinforcements coming forward, confirmed by this operation order. The supporting artillery included some 32 100-millimetre howitzers, at least eight 75-millimetre guns, a troop of '88s' and various other guns in direct support, apart from the medium and heavy guns in the area of Africa Division to the north. There was mention also of 2 Company of 900 Engineer Battalion standing by at [Belhamed](#) ready to lay mines as required, and of ammunition for tank guns, implying that Boettcher also had tanks at hand.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 15 – JOINING HANDS WITH THE TOBRUK GARRISON

CHAPTER 15

Joining Hands with the Tobruk Garrison

i

DAWN of 26 November was unwelcome on the bald top of [Belhamed](#). As early as 6.15 a.m. 18 Battalion was 'mortared and shelled intensely' ¹ and A and B Companies scarcely dared move because of machine-gun fire. An officer of 20 Battalion says much the same, but adds that his men 'Went back and destroyed A Tk guns passed in the night'. Then there was a minor counter-thrust: 'about patrol size and [we] would have got the lot if the fwd tps had held their fire', he says. ² It reminded Captain Bassett at Brigade Headquarters of [Cemetery Hill](#) in [Crete](#), 'which [Kip](#) and I found more profitable to return to the enemy we could slaughter there'. ³ Guns pounded the two battalions from three sides and strong bodies of infantry seemed to be bombarding them with mortars before counter-attacking. But the wounded from the night before were thick in places and the stretcher bearers carried out their work undeterred by the fire. There was no end to this, however, and when they collected all the overnight cases they found more awaiting them from the morning's action.

The I tanks and some of the supporting weapons and transport got through from [Zaafran](#) soon after 7 a.m. and the crews of the Matildas, thinking the occupied area stretched some way south of the actual positions, exposed their thick armour in silhouette on the skyline to anti-tank guns. 'Our tanks turned northwards and engaged the enemy with all weapons', says the diary of 44 Royal Tanks, and some 'enemy A/Tk & M.G. guns were put out of action'. But when the tanks rallied at 7.30 four were destroyed and three damaged, a high price to pay for this mistake. [Inglis](#) says in a post-war narrative that he meant the tanks to 'take up a position between [Belhamed](#) and the Trigh Capuzzo ready to protect the infantry against armoured counter attack or to deal with any enemy who happened to have been outside the area of the night attack on its limited front.' The infantry who witnessed the scene were puzzled. They saw about eleven Matildas push past the flank of

¹ 18 Bn diary.

² McPhail.

³ Letter, 8 Dec 1941.

20 Battalion and would have told their crews, had they been able, that they had just seen German tractors pulling 88-millimetre guns into place on the escarpment at [Sidi Rezegh](#). They soon saw these powerful guns in action: 'The tanks advanced and were shot up.... The German fire was deadly in its accuracy. After every bang a tank burst into flames'. ¹

The other supporting arms had varying degrees of success in getting on to [Belhamed](#). The column came under heavy shellfire at dawn through which it crawled at a nerve-racking pace until it reached the shelter of the wadi just past halfway. The tanks went on ahead from there and the rest stayed for an hour and a half. Just as the depleted squadron was returning, Major Levy ² of 31 Anti-Tank Battery decided to attempt what the tank commanders told him was impossible and get his three 2-pounder troops forward to support the infantry. Picking his way on a motorcycle, Levy led the column in single file along ledges on the side of the escarpment and got two troops forward without loss to 18 Battalion, but the fire was too heavy to get through to 20 Battalion and the third troop did not make its way up to that unit until dusk. Major Johansen ³ got 5 and 6 Platoons of his 2 MG Company into place on the escarpment north of the 18th in much the same way and the excellent observation to the north and the long range of the Vickers guns gave them a wide selection of targets. Behind them, on the eastern slopes of the wadi, 46 Field Battery had gone into action at 6.30 a.m. in response to 'an urgent call for support from 20 Bn' ⁴ and was kept so busy from then onwards that, when it became possible to move the guns farther forward, only E Troop could be spared and B Troop remained to answer the many calls for support. These calls continued to be so frequent and compelling that B Troop had to stay where it was. Though both troops were put on the permanent grid of the regiment by the survey section in 'very fast time', ⁵ the battery therefore could not function as such throughout the day.

It was a difficult and strenuous morning for the field gunners, as Duff describes it:

¹ D. J. C. Pringle, draft history of 20 Bn.

There is some evidence that 44 R Tks meant to push right through to Ed Duda in response to the order of 5.45 a.m. (See p. 255) while 6 Bde mounted a daylight attack with guns and tanks and to winkle out Germans in pockets in the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment. Watkins, for example (The Army Quarterly, Oct 1953, pp. 53–4), describes this action as 'an abortive attempt to join up with the [Tobruk](#) garrison by day'. But Bassett says that in the hour's pause to consider this order Lt-Col Yeo of 44 R Tks 'decided Duda must wait until that night' to my relief'.

² Maj P.B. Levy, m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 1 Aug 1906; advertising agent; died of wounds 24 Jul 1942.

³ Maj C.C. Johansen, m.i.d.; Plimmerton; born Norsewood, 2 Oct 1910; civil servant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁴ Duff, report.

⁵ Ibid.

At approx 0900 hrs, Bde reported 18 and 20 Bns were being heavily attacked and asked for 'defensive fire'. The safe lines were decided on with the Brig. and all four btys engaged by predicted fire. This was reported as very successful and bears out that the 1/100000 map is very accurate. Some delay occurred as Arty boards had not sufficient scope to compete with the switches asked for.

At 1030 hrs, repetition of these concentrations was asked for and fired, the major opposition was apparently neutralised. The amn situation was acute, and orders were given for essential and emergency tasks only to be engaged. This naturally resulted in much enemy mortar fire being brought down on our infantry, but as guns were down to 30 r.p.g. ¹ little could be done.

Communication with [BELHAMED](#) was entirely by W/T as OP lines were continually being cut, and movement on the feature itself was practically

impossible.

The ammunition stocks may be compared with the average expenditure per gun per day since the 22nd of just over 21 rounds and the average fired this day of 23.5 rounds per gun.

Another cause for grave concern was the loss this morning of three commanding officers in succession in 20 Battalion, an extraordinary piece of bad luck, particularly since the first of them was [Kippenberger](#) on whom [Inglis](#) relied greatly. [Kippenberger](#) had come upon Peart and with him checked the positions of both battalions on the map. As he put it in his diary, he was 'delightedly saying everyone was just where he should be when we came under bursts of M.G. fire from about 600 yards.' One long burst, starting low, lifted towards him and he watched the track of the bullets in the sand 'but was hit on the way down, bullet going through left thigh entering just about knee'. His adjutant, Captain Rhodes, ² was hit at the same time in the face and hand and Captain Mackay ³ of B Company, 18 Battalion, was wounded in the head. This was shortly before the tanks appeared on the scene and one of them was set alight nearby, remaining with its column of black smoke a prominent landmark for some hours.

Mortar bombs rained down in the area for half an hour after this and several more men were hit. Major Mitchell again assumed command of 20 Battalion; but he too was hit, as [Kippenberger](#) learned when a signaller with a wireless set came up and crouched alongside him. Speaking to each 20 Battalion company in turn except D, [Kippenberger](#) learned that Captain Baker ⁴ had taken over command of A Company from Mitchell, that B was 'also cheerful' under Captain Agar, ⁵ and then when Mitchell was wounded Captain

¹ Rounds per gun.

² Maj G.A.T. Rhodes, m.i.d.; Taiko, [Timaru](#); born [Timaru](#), 20 Oct 1914; farm cadet; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

³ Maj J.G. Mackay, ED; [Papakura](#); born NZ 19 Jun 1913; farmer; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁴ Maj J.F. Baker; [Wellington](#); born Dunedin, 18 Dec 1915; warehouseman; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

⁵ Maj R.E. Agar, ED; [Wellington](#); born Belfast, 4 Dec 1903; company secretary.

Fontaine of C Company took command of the battalion. Shortly afterwards Sergeant-Major Grooby, ¹ now in command of C Company, reported over the same wireless set that 'all was well, a bit of a counter-attack had been beaten off and the boys were quite happy.' Peart, also lightly wounded but remaining with his unit, now assumed joint command of the two battalions in place of [Kippenberger](#).

This rapid change of command was bewildering not only to [Inglis](#) but to [Freyberg](#) himself. It made it look as though the 20th was indeed in a bad position and in need of help and partly accounts for the greater interest taken by Division this day in 4 Brigade than in 6 Brigade, which was actually in a far worse position. ² When Fontaine as well was wounded (and Captain Agar then took command of the 20th) it made things look black indeed, though it was no more than bad luck that three COs in succession were hit. Nine officers altogether in 20 Battalion were wounded in the night attack and on this day and total casualties in the unit were nearly 70, a far smaller loss than any of Barrowclough's four battalions had so far suffered, while 18 Battalion lost no more than 49, including three officers, on the 25th and 26th, leaving the unit with the substantial strength of 21 officers and 610 other ranks.

Talk of counter-attack on [Belhamed](#) was exaggerated, though this 'bare feature providing no cover against the heavy shelling and mortaring' ³ was anything but comfortable. At 4 Brigade Head-quarters it was assumed that the enemy previously on [Belhamed](#) had been driven westwards, and Ed Duda got undeserved blame for much of the fire which came down on the two battalions. [Inglis](#) was very much alive to the uses of air support and his staff made a series of urgent requests in the morning for bombing in an area which included Ed Duda and thus caused a tragic error.

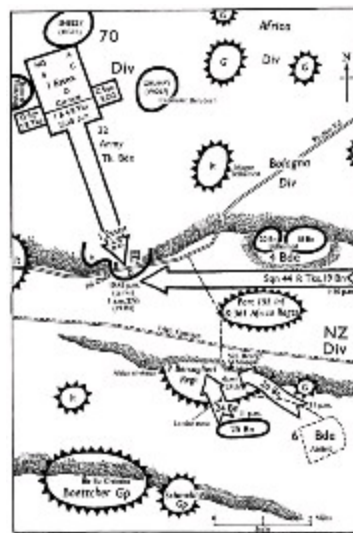
With no direct wireless link between the New Zealand Division and the **Tobruk** garrison, 13 Corps had to act as go-between and the delay thus imposed also contributed to the ensuing tragedy. **Freyberg** had been anxious to know when 70 Division was due to advance to Ed Duda and Gentry had signalled at 4.50 a.m. asking 'What time does **TOBRUK** garrison attack?', to which Corps replied at 7.30 ⁴ that the diversionary attack had already been mounted at 9 p.m. the previous night. Then Corps signalled Scobie at 11.15 a.m. as follows:

¹ WO II H.L. Grooby, m.i.d.; born Westport, 23 May 1907; hardware merchant; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

² Air support called for in support of **Inglis** would have been better directed to help Barrowclough.

³ 4 Bde diary.

⁴ Received at 8.45 a.m.



LINKING UP WITH TOBRUK, 26 NOVEMBER AND NIGHT 26-27 NOVEMBER

NZ DIV reports BEL HAMED and **SIDI REZEGH** captured but stiff fighting still going on both places. Ammunition situation precarious. Exert greatest possible pressure

toward BEL HAMED and ED DUDA to relieve pressure on NZ DIV.

But Scobie had already got wind of [Freyberg's](#) troubles and could in any case have guessed some of them from the obvious fact that Ed Duda was still in enemy hands.

¹ At all events Scobie decided that no mere diversionary attack was now called for and he ordered 32 Army Tank Brigade to start its long-awaited advance to Ed Duda and to be prepared to fight for this position.

While the New Zealanders were calling for bombing on Ed Duda, therefore, Brigadier Willison was marshalling his tanks and armoured cars and 1 Essex with supporting arms to seize this important feature, the climax of the [Tobruk](#) sortie. The plan was simple. The Matildas of 4 Royal Tanks, followed by the cruisers and light tanks of 1 Royal Tanks and with the I tanks of D Squadron, 7 Royal Tanks, in reserve, were to cross the intervening ground from the existing perimeter at full speed, with supporting fire from two RHA batteries; then 1 Essex escorted by C Squadron, King's Dragoon Guards, plus anti-tank and Vickers guns, would quickly take over. Zero hour was five minutes past midday.

The enemy was alert and shellfire damaged two tanks before they crossed the starting line, but the tanks crossed the four and a half miles to Ed Duda without further harm. Fire on the objective became very heavy indeed and in a haze of dust and smoke 4 Royal Tanks tried to settle down on the feature until the infantry arrived. Willison could see through the dust 'rows of flashes' from enemy guns below and judged that a whole panzer division must be facing him. Then the dust blew away and for a revealing moment he could see no more than a series of field-gun positions. To his tanks on the crest of the rise he then signalled 'Cease 2-pdr all Besa', getting them to concentrate the fire of their medium machine guns on the vulnerable enemy below. 'This was too much for the enemy guns', the [United Kingdom](#) narrative states; 'the crews of the nearest four put up their hands. The men of the next battery turned round and fled, leaving their guns. The crews of the four guns on our left were completely wiped out....' ² Willison could now order up 1 Essex.

¹ Scobie had by some unstated means received a request for counter-battery fire on targets north and west of the Tobruk By-pass road and he may have intercepted a signal from NZ Div to Corps of 9.15 a.m. that 4 Bde was 'firmly' on [Belhamed](#) and 6 Bde 'substantially in possession' of [Sidi](#)

Rezegh.

² Capt Jackman of 1 Royal Northumberland Fusiliers came forward with Z Coy and stationed some of his Vickers guns to the right of the tanks and then personally led the remainder between the tanks and the enemy guns on the left flank, adding such a volume of MMG fire that he did much to end resistance here. In so doing he was killed and gained a posthumous VC.

This was the second gained in the course of the [Tobruk](#) sortie, the first having been won by Capt Gardner of the RTR, who rescued a badly-wounded KDG officer under heavy fire on 23 Nov. (Gardner won an MC in battleaxe.) Others who had already earned VCs were Brig 'Jock' Compbell, Lt-Col Keyes, 2 Lt G.W. Gunn (of 3 RHA), and Rifleman Beeley.

The carrier platoon led the way, then came D Company with an anti-tank troop and B Company echeloned back to the right, C to the left, then Headquarters, and at the rear A Company with the transport. Some 200 yards from the escarpment at Ed Duda the carriers and a platoon of D Company were heavily bombed, the company commander and carrier platoon commander were both killed and some thirty-five others killed or wounded. This was the bombing ordered by 4 Brigade in ignorance of Scobie's moves but, though it took away much of the glow of the success which was soon achieved, it did not halt the advance. As the Essex history says,

At this time the whole Tank Brigade had withdrawn to the left flank, and was formed up ready to support the Battalion if required.

As the remainder of the Battalion reached the escarpment, it came under heavy artillery fire at fairly short range, both from field and heavy artillery. Many of the guns could actually be seen and some of them were undoubtedly firing over open sights. ¹

Some of these guns were in a wadi to the north-west and the Vickers guns of 1 Northumberland Fusiliers gave their crews a lively time as the Essex advanced; but arrangements for supporting fire from 1 RHA fell through.

Ed Duda itself was not nearly as well prepared for defence as had been expected and its Italian 'garrison' quickly surrendered. A platoon commander ² of C Company, 1 Essex, whose vivid account is appended to the regimental history, says,

'Two Italians came out of a wadi waving white rags', and when he waved them over, to his surprise 'they were followed by another thirty or so.' He left one man to guard them and pushed on with the rest of his platoon to the By-pass road, where he saw 'a continuous storm of shells bursting down its length, and knocking the telegraph poles about like peasticks.' Despite this fire he took his objective with comparatively few losses and disposed his platoon with one section covering the road and the other two sections a hundred yards in front of it.

The feature itself was overlooked by higher ground to the west, while to the east the ground fell away slightly and provided an entry into the position, and it needed all the resources of 1 Essex to defend it. Lieutenant-Colonel Nichols disposed B Company on the right facing west, D Company (only 40 strong) in the centre up to 300 yards south of the By-pass, and C Company on the left astride the road and facing generally east. He hoped to keep A Company in reserve but in the end could hold only one platoon of it back, committing the rest to reinforce the line between B and D. Even the reserve platoon had to dig in in defence of a large

¹ Martin, *The Essex Regiment, 1928–1950*, pp. 79–80, quoting [Lt-Col Nichols](#).

² Lt P.P.S. Brownless.

wadi running north-westwards from the westwards from the western end of the position. The tanks stayed nearby while the infantry dug in and helped beat off several small counter-attacks, the first of them at about 3 p.m. This was by two or three enemy tanks which 'wiped out' a detachment some 200 yards in front of the main Essex position but were soon driven away. Another was by about two companies of infantry who were badly shot up in their lorries at a range of some 200 yards. A platoon made a 'sharp and spirited' ¹ counter-thrust and took 50–80 prisoners, while 30 more prisoners were taken by C Company in a similar engagement. None of these skirmishes gave rise to anything more than very local anxieties, and when casualties were totalled up it was found that the battalion had lost only 65 all told, a figure which, if it includes those lost in the bombing, is modest indeed for such an operation.

Though 4 Brigade was no more than two miles away, it remained for some time unaware that Ed Duda had been seized. At 1.12 p.m. [Freyberg](#) signalled to Godwin-Austen, repeated to Scobie, that 'Situation demands TOBRUK Garrison exerts its greatest pressure as early as possible. We shall endeavour to reach ED DUDA after darkness.' From its vantage points on the higher escarpment, however, 6 Brigade had a good though distant view and at 4.30 p.m. in a situation report described the action as follows:

Throughout the past two hours a tank battle has been taking place about three miles ahead on the right front, this must be the sortie being made by the [Tobruk](#) garrison.

The first news at Division, however, was a signal from Scobie to [Freyberg](#) which came in at 3.15 p.m. and stated baldly: 'We are on ED DUDA—ensure NOT bombed'. It did not occur to the recipients that this was in any way connected with the bombing which had been ordered on Ed Duda a little earlier, and even that night [Freyberg](#) did not suspect the truth and wrote this in his diary:

Everyone was greatly cheered at lunch time when sweeps of [RAF](#) fighters drove enemy fighters out of the air, a fight taking place above the front. This was followed by a formation of 17 long nosed Blenheims dropping 17,000 lbs of explosives on the enemy. They flew over us and gave [Greece](#) and Create conscious people a slit trench feeling until the fighters were identified! Further sweeps came and then 19 Marylands with 19 odd tons for the Boche. From all accounts both found their marks on German posns... 4 Bde's request for air support on the [Belhamed](#) posn was most effectively answered.

When news came that Scobie had reached Ed Duda [Freyberg](#) had to make up his mind how to join hands with him there at the earliest possible moment.

¹ Nichols, quoted by Martin, p. 81.

iii

In the meantime [Freyberg](#) visited Barrowclough and saw for himself the difficulties 6 Brigade faced. The first task had been to extricate those troops, chiefly

of 21 Battalion, who had got into difficulties during the night. Various detachments of the 21st and of A Company, 24 Battalion, were below the escarpment at dawn, or sheltering in its many wadis, or silhouetted above it, and some were in perilous straits. The rest of 24 Battalion, much of 26 Battalion, and elements of 25 Battalion were under fire from the crest of the escarpment, against which they had poor cover and to which they could seldom make effective reply. Those who were beyond the reach of enemy on the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment—the field gunners, administrative elements and B Echelons—came under fire from the southern escarpment.

For a short time guns in the Ed Duda area and north of [Belhamed](#) were directed by observers in a lattice-work tower erected for that purpose south-west of the Mosque; ¹ but the 18-pounder troop of 33 Anti-Tank Battery, M Troop, which had taken up positions in the 24 Battalion area facing west and south while it was still dark, soon deprived the enemy of this advantage. After dawn 47 Field Battery, back from its excursion to the brink of the escarpment, went into action on the edge of the airfield and, despite opposition from enemy guns, 48 Field Battery succeeded in siting its guns even farther forward on the north-western edge and found a profusion of targets to the north, west and south. The 2-pounders were also well up in support of the infantry but under such fire that their crews had to keep their heads down most of the day.

Below the escarpment and in many wadis and recesses on its slopes most of 21 Battalion and Forder's company of the 24th and their supporting Vickers platoons were in serious trouble as soon as it got light enough to reveal these various detachments to the numerous enemy around. The plight of D Company of the 21st under Captain Trolove ² was soon seen to be hopeless. Trolove had descended the steep slope in the dark with some fifty men and on Colonel Allen's instructions charged a group of Italians chattering excitedly somewhere near the Mosque. Several prisoners were taken and Trolove himself was wounded. Allen then told Lieutenant Hargrave, ³ now in command, to carry on as far as the Trigh Capuzzo and await the rest of the unit. Thus Hargrave found himself at dawn a quarter of a mile north-east of the Mosque. 'The escarpment was fairly steep and broken—a valley ran right along

¹ It was found later to be the skeleton of a larger aircraft wing.

² Capt F.J. Trolove; Te Mata; born Raglan, 14 Feb 1905; sheep farmer; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

³ Capt C.R. Hargrave; [Whangarei](#); born NZ 6 Feb 1911; public accountant and auditor; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.

base and rose very gradually away from it', he says. 'Ground was not very rough with scattered cover, the usual desert growth and patches of open country with no cover.' The company lay fairly well hidden in scrub some 400 yards from the ridge and could see troops digging in to the north. Two volunteers went out to investigate, quickly drew fire, and reported back that the troops were German and that German vehicles were less than a mile away. There was no sign of any others of 21 Battalion and, as the plan had evidently gone amiss, Hargrave thought it best to withdraw. As he puts it, 'our only chance of getting back to our lines was to make our way East into a blazing rising sun and then make a break across the more open ground before going up the escarpment.' This might very well have worked if the enemy to the north was all they had to fear; but the men soon found they were surrounded and one of them mentions being driven backwards and forwards across a wadi; 'they proceeded to play table tennis with us', he says, and when several tanks appeared on the scene the end came quickly. Hargrave had a sergeant killed as soon as he made a move and was then shot in the throat himself and lost consciousness. When he revived his men were being marched off as prisoners. ¹

Intense fire from the rim of the escarpment at the climax of the night advance had broken up the rest of Allen's command into smaller detachments, most of which clashed in the dark with enemy on the slopes or on the flat below, so that long before dawn Allen began to realise that he would have to withdraw. Elements of A and C Companies of the 24th and at least one detachment of 3 MG Company had also descended all or part of the way to the foot of the slopes and were mostly out of touch with each other when morning came. The resulting confusion still cannot be disentangled, and the essence distilled from the many accounts is of growing uncertainty and danger as the light increased and of sudden and violent clashes as the sun began to blaze on the scene. Allen had with him part of his headquarters and C Company and Forder's group of the 24th, perhaps 150 all told, and with him

was the commander of C Company, Captain Tongue,² while Lieutenant Smith³ had a small advanced guard just to the north. Smith went back for orders before dawn and heard Tongue suggest withdrawing. Dutton, the adjutant, was in favour of this and so, after a careful pause, was Colonel Allen. 'Yes, I think it best to go back', he concluded, and Tongue and Smith quickly assembled a party of perhaps forty or more and headed back towards the ridge at a brisk

¹ Two of them were detailed under German escort to pick up Hargrave.

² Capt W.M. Tongue, ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 22 Jun 1908; funeral director; p.w. 29 Nov 1941.

³ Capt H.H.W. Smith; Matatoki, [Thames](#); born Waitotara, 11 Jan 1914; farmer; p.w. 29 Nov 1941.

pace. Just as it was getting light, Smith 'saw a man on the skyline shaking his blanket and others moving round'. What followed as Smith describes it was typical of many skirmishes that took place:

I sent two men towards them to see who they were. They were Jerries and dug in. They didn't waste time but opened fire straight away with machine guns and rifles as soon as they saw us. I told the men to fix bayonets and was pleased to see them drop to the ground as one to do this. They waited till I told them and then away we went up the hill. It was a bloody do with grenades and bayonets. When the area was cleared we went on but more slowly as we had wounded and some prisoners.

Smith headed eastwards along the ridge, making good use of cover offered by the broken ground, rather than risk his men on the open ground to the south, and in due course came upon the large wadi north of the airfield in the upper part of which some of 6 Brigade were established. With twenty-nine men, five of them wounded, and five prisoners, he staggered in and after a brief rest took up a defensive position in the area.

The night of the 25th-26th had played tricks on several detachments by letting

them settle in what looked like dominating ground but which turned out to be overlooked on both sides by enemy. 'Daylight showed us what a bad position we had taken', says Private Logan ¹ of 7 Platoon of Forder's company. 'Enemy fire of all descriptions poured into the area.' Elements of 7 and 8 Platoons had linked up in the dark under Lieutenant Hill ² near the edge of the escarpment and found a section of Vickers guns had dug in in front of them. Farther east part of C Company of the 24th was in much the same condition and other Vickers gunners were very much on their own in front of the infantry and under concentrated fire. After an hour or so several tanks nosed forward, and as their first task they bombed some of the machine-gunners with grenades, driving them from their shallow trenches, and killed or captured them. Another Vickers gun fired a stream of bullets at one tank at such close range that, when its commander raised himself to look around, his head was promptly shot off. Another Vickers section found itself unable to cover the ground immediately in front because of the curve of the slope and the men had to take potshots with their rifles at several LMGs sited within 50 yards of them. ³ Forder says that his men tried to 'engage the enemy in the Mosque area from the lip of the wadi but it was solid rock and the contour was such that the view of the German positions could not be obtained without complete exposure to other enemy positions', and as the morning advanced all concerned realised they could do little from where they were.

¹ Cpl G.H. Logan; born NZ 19 Sep 1912; salesman; p.w. Nov 1941.

² Lt M.L. Hill, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Auckland](#), 6 Sep 1916; clerk; twice wounded.

³ A 'spandau' no more than 15 yards off was silenced by Sgt J.M. O'Brien, who had to stand up and fire several shots to do this. See Kay, p. 140.

A party estimated at 150–200 strong gradually assembled under Allen in a large wadi and somehow he had to get them all away. The closeness of the enemy had one good result, however, in that they made no mistake about the wounded, and several accounts mention that firing eased as soon as stretcher bearers or walking wounded were seen. Forder goes on to say.

As the first groups moved off and came within view of the enemy a most remarkable thing happened. The German fire ceased abruptly and, when it became clear that the enemy... intended to allow the carrying parties to move unmolested, all the wounded were got under way followed by the remainder of the troops.

By degrees and with many adventures Allen's party got back to rejoin 6 Brigade, with Allen himself bringing up the rear and reporting at Brigade Headquarters about 4 p.m.

But others outside his control and left largely to their own resources were not all so fortunate. His B Company, for example, under Captain Yeoman, ¹ had been silhouetted on the slopes at first light and dashed down to take cover from the fire which at once started up. Yeoman turned left, perhaps half his men followed, and all were soon pinned down by a strong Bersaglieri position until the three tanks came up and captured them. The other half of the company followed Sergeant Lord, ² who turned right and found shelter in a small wadi. The tanks came on and captured some of Lord's men, too; but others escaped in a mad dash back up the slopes, in the course of which they scattered. Lord did his best to collect them but found the task hopeless and with ten men was forced to ground by fierce fire. He could see over the crest, however, and was a sad witness of the capture of Hargrave's and Yeoman's men. When fire died down this small party crept back along a gully and joined a larger group which was much troubled by a machine gun some distance off. Lord's party stalked this and then charged and drove away its crew, at a cost of three killed and two wounded, and in carrying back the wounded, unlike those who had done so earlier, they came under further fire.

Others of 21 Battalion and of Forder's company made their way south through C Company of the 24th, and Lieutenant Nathan ³ of 14 Platoon of the 24th was most active in collecting wounded under heavy fire and getting them back to the rear. Some of Tomlinson's own company had become mixed up with Forder's and got back however they could, the Niue Islander, Japeth, ⁴ among them. Japeth

¹ Capt A.A. Yeoman, m.i.d.; Katikati; born [Whakatane](#), 24 Feb 1914; dairy farmer; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.

² 2 Lt S.V. Lord, DCM; Frankton Junction; born [Wellington](#), 22 Mar 1906; labourer.

³ Capt C.R. Nathan; born NZ 18 Oct 1918; Regular soldier; died of wounds 12 Dec 1941.

⁴ Pte [W. Japeth](#); [Helensville](#); born Niue Island, 10 Nov 1900; labourer; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

must have been on the left, because he engaged with his 'Elephant Gun or Boys Rifle' the three tanks which mounted the escarpment ¹ and which also menaced some of A Company of the 24th farther to the west, as well as 7 and 8 Platoons of 3 MG Company. ² When all these troops withdrew, as they did by about 11 a.m., Tomlinson was very much alone, out of touch with Battalion Headquarters, and deeply perplexed. When he saw other troops pulling out he might very well have done the same; but he decided to stay and thus held in place about a third of the northern side of Shuttleworth's 'box'. Though his men could not move for long periods under heavy aimed fire and a nerve-shaking bombardment by guns and mortars, they nevertheless beat back several minor counter-attacks and allowed Shuttleworth and others in the rear to reorganise and stabilise the position.

Lieutenant-Colonel Page also helped greatly, when he heard of Allen's predicament, by sending his C Company northwards to the escarpment to cover the withdrawal of Allen's group. Mortars and the reserve platoon of 3 MG Company gave covering fire and two platoons rose to their feet and charged, reaching a crest from which they could cover the retreat. When they tried to get farther forward they attracted much fire and lost several men, and the company commander, Captain Thomson, ³ decided to stay where he was. From there his men worked hard getting wounded of 21 Battalion up the slopes and covering the others of Allen's party until they all got through. This took some hours and then Thomson withdrew to his original position, many of the 21st staying with him. The action cost him 5 killed and 17 wounded and he welcomed these reinforcements. D Company of the 26th was on top of the rise to his right rear, with A farther east and D to the south behind C.

For all Tomlinson's valuable contribution, however, the chief bulwark of 6 Brigade this day was 25 Battalion, which had been meant to face south but now had to face north through its own transport area and do what it could to subdue the fire from [Sidi Rezegh](#). Private Reed talks of 'a lovely day of machine gunning and mortar fire that kept us well pinned down' and Lieutenant Cathie says it 'seemed a long day' in which he was 'plastered with mortar fire and could not do much about it'. In such circumstances, hard on the nerves of the men, Major Burton had to hold on at all costs, as Barrowclough told him when he reported in the morning. Machine-gun fire poured into the position with scarcely

¹ Japeth was hit between the eyes and the barrel of his massive rifle 'bent like a fish-hook'; but he survived, spending a ghastly hour or so in a concrete cistern chock-a-block with badly wounded men until carriers could take them back.

² No. 7 Pl, 3 MG Coy, fired some 14,000 rounds this morning before withdrawing and came under fire not only from 26 Bn but from 8 MG Pl in so doing, though no one was hit.

³ Lt-Col E.J. Thomson, ED; [Wellington](#); born Dunedin, 5 Feb 1910; business manager.

a pause from three sides, backed up by constant shelling and mortar bombing. Two or three MG posts kept up a volume of fire that became quite intolerable and Burton got his mortars to lay down HE and smoke and then rushed them with his five carriers. Two carriers were lost, but the posts were silenced. Then Burton was horrified to see some of his A Company in the west with their hands raised and was much relieved when a timely mortar bombardment made them take cover again and gave them occasion to change their minds. Some of them did in fact surrender to tanks and infantry in the west, but others thought better of it when hardier comrades discouraged them from giving themselves up. Thus A Company held on and Burton's attention was at once claimed by the centre of his line, which was under heavy attack. This, too, held; but Burton told Brigade he needed help and the weak A Company of 21 Battalion under Captain Ferguson and the 24 Battalion carriers under Lieutenant A.C. Yeoman hurried forward.

Ferguson had been led to believe that 25 Battalion was no more than 80 or 90 strong and at the end of its tether and he was only too willing to help. He reached Burton at 11.15 a.m. and at once charged forward with the carriers to occupy a slight rise north-west of Burton's position. Enemy had been forming up apparently to attack and this sudden move discouraged them; but the ground seized was found to be unoccupied and not, as Burton thought, an enemy position. Smoke put down in support blinded the carriers and caused two of them to collide, putting one out of action. Few men were hit, however, and this energetic thrust seemed to take the heart out of a hitherto aggressive enemy and greatly ease the strain on the battered 25th. No further counter-attack developed, though mortar fire became so heavy at 5 p.m. and again at dusk that Burton expected one.

The 18-pounders of M Troop fought a useful supporting action from a little to the east, engaging and destroying four guns at 3500-4000 yards in the early morning, silencing more guns to the south-west, and finally scoring direct hits on two infantry guns ¹ which tried to come into action 2500 yards away. Then tanks in the far distance—the same, in all probability, as those which overran the MMGs and part of the 21st, 24th and 25th—were engaged and disappeared and M Troop turned its attention to MG posts 'in the immediate foreground', getting one gunner killed and three wounded in a warm exchange of fire but giving better than it received. B Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), took some part in these actions and its diary mentions one skirmish at 11 a.m., with an enemy force at the foot of the southern escarpment. 'Our Tks engaged', it says; 'Enemy

¹ Probably 75-mm howitzers.

withdrew, leaving some vehicles in flames.' Just before dusk six or seven tanks came in sight at close range and M Troop at once opened fire and blew the turrets off two and set three others on fire. According to the M Troop commander, Lieutenant Betts, ¹ this was 'tremendously exciting' and 'the 6th Field Regt and odd troops and infantry attached became enthusiastic spectators'.

Meanwhile 26 Battalion could no longer ignore a strongpoint to the right rear of D Company and in an elevated section of the escarpment rim, dominating the whole

of Page's rear and causing much trouble. One platoon attacked but was driven back. Then this and another platoon made a determined effort to close in with heavy mortar support; but this, too, proved futile and nine men were wounded. These lay on exposed ground south of the strongpoint and it took three hours to bring them back under heavy fire, though the rescuers luckily escaped harm. The strongpoint was evidently far more extensive and well-equipped than had been thought and a third and even heavier attack was being prepared, only to be abandoned when word came that the battalion would mount another night attack on [Sidi Rezegh](#).

Brigadier Barrowclough had toured as much as he could of the front soon after dawn and found the situation 'disorganised and somewhat precarious', as he wrote in his report. 'Every effort was made to organise a defensive system but the difficulties of doing so were tremendous as the whole area was under observation and fire from strong enemy positions', he added. Shuttleworth deserved every credit for the way he 'restored a very grave situation'. But Barrowclough could see for himself that the troops were 'extremely tired, having been continuously in action for several days' and could still get no rest because of the 'constant shelling and machine gun fire to which they were subjected'. At 4.30 p.m. 6 Brigade sent the situation report to Division which described what could be seen of the sortie to Ed Duda and also outlined the general situation, which at that time was 'quiet with sporadic shooting by a hy inf gun in the valley below'. A 'series of heavy counter attacks from the North and later from the West' had been mounted against 24 Battalion; but by a slip of the pen it reported, 'Casualties have been light'.² There were also 'gun and machine gun positions well dug in down on the flat below'—stronger in fact than anyone yet realised, as 4 Brigade was to learn.

It was hard even late in the day to get any reliable estimates of strengths and losses, though it was obvious enough that 21 Battalion

¹ Capt B.F. Betts; born [Christchurch](#), 1 Apr 1913; warehouseman.

² The TQ's notes from which this sitrep was written say 'Casualties not light,' as indeed was the case.

had been very hard hit and that the 24th had also suffered much loss. B and D

Companies of the latter, however, had held on just west of the airfield throughout the day in exposed positions and had lost very few men, and C Company was still largely intact, though reduced in strength. Forder's company (A) had suffered most and for the next two days it ceased to exist as such, its elements being used to reinforce Shuttleworth's other companies. ¹ Barrowclough still regarded 25 Battalion as being part of Shuttleworth's command and did not list it separately in his situation report; but Burton had in fact fought independently a very fine action this day and had managed to hold on with only minor loss against a formidable concentration of fire and a series of counter-attacks. Grave fears were felt for Colonel Allen's safety and it was a huge relief when he reported in after shepherding his motley flock complete with wounded and a handful of prisoners back to safety. Only fifteen officers of the 21st remained in action and other casualties in the unit were heavy, though they could not yet be estimated except that roughly a company and a half had been lost. B Company—like Forder's in the 24th—lost its identity and its few survivors joined C Company, while D was also gravely weakened. A Company, of course, remained with Burton; but it had lost heavily at [Bir Ghirba](#) and now numbered no more than fifty. A complete reorganisation was essential before the 21st could undertake any further offensive operation. Of the two platoons of 3 MG Company which had gone forward to the attack with eight Vickers guns only one gun detachment remained in action, the other seven guns having been abandoned, their locks buried. ² As one sergeant says, 'the place was too hot even for Machine Gunners'.

iv

Even before he received the report of 4.30 p.m. from 6 Brigade, [Freyberg](#) had been thinking hard about how he should join hands with Scobie. He had hoped that Barrowclough would somehow be able to clear up the situation at [Sidi Rezegh](#) during the day and push across to Ed Duda after dark. It was essential to get there that night; but by about 4 p.m. he came to realise that 6 Brigade could not be relied on to get through. This left only 4 Brigade, and [Freyberg](#) telephoned [Inglis](#) about this time and said, 'You will join them tonight'. Later he rang Barrowclough and told him to 'reorganise and get secure on top of the hill' ³— [Sidi Rezegh](#). Thus both brigades were to undertake another night attack, the 4th to

¹ A Coy, 24 Bn, had a platoon away on PW escort duties; when this came back the company was reassembled as such.

² All were regained next day.

³ GOC's diary.

reach Ed Duda and the 6th to complete the capture of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, and there was no reason to suppose that one would be easier than the other. But of the two [Inglis's](#) task was the more urgent and it was to this that [Freyberg](#) gave his main attention.

He also summoned Brigadiers Miles and Watkins to consult them 'regarding moves for continuing the battle after we link at [Tobruk](#)'. Everything depended on the situation the morning disclosed. 'Possibly little chukker and big raid', he dictated for his diary. ¹ Captain Bell came in with a suggestion that the German armour at present in the frontier area might intervene either along the [Via Balbia](#) or the Trigh Capuzzo; but this gained small attention, for there was no thought that enough German tanks remained to exercise much influence on the battle. A signal had moreover been intercepted to the effect that the Germans outside [Tobruk](#) 'were encircled by armd forces and wanting to know where their panzer division was', ² and he meant to exploit the weakness this suggested.

From a wider viewpoint an LO from 13 Corps brought encouraging news. Corps Headquarters was moving 'considerably nearer us' and there was no suggestion that this was due to the enemy's encouragement. 'They say NZ Div has been the only star in the firmament recently but now consider things much better—Armd Bdes recovering, tanks from [Omar](#) district gone up near [Bardia](#), Corps Intelligence considering this latter a last desperate move.' Thus he recorded it all in his diary, adding 'We shall see'. Any anxieties this may have prompted regarding 5 Brigade were offset by a 'cheerful letter' from Hargest. Though written the day before, this expressed firm confidence that the enemy armour would make little impression on Hargest's positions at [Capuzzo](#) and Upper Sollum: 'We are ready to receive them and will give a good account of ourselves'. ³

[Inglis](#) had meanwhile gone ahead with planning for the Ed Duda advance. His 20 Battalion was still awkwardly placed on the western half of [Belhamed](#) and it was not until after dark that supporting anti-tank guns could get forward to it; 18 Battalion was less hard-pressed but nevertheless fully committed on the eastern half; and only 19 Battalion was available for the Ed Duda operation. To send one battalion nine miles from [Zaafran](#) to Ed Duda under cover of darkness was an ambitious project and strong support was essential. This could only come from the I tanks, and [Inglis](#)

¹ He also noted that the ` [BBC](#) was in a ranting mood on the war of nerves style, telling the world we have joined with [Tobruk](#) and that further British armd forces were coming up the coast to the frontier to deal with Rommel's venture....'

² GOC's diary.

³ See p. 316.

therefore called up Hartnell of 19 Battalion and Yeo of 44 Royal Tanks and put the proposal to them. They had already been warned in a characteristically brief order from Bassett at 4.20 p.m.:

To 44 RTR 19 Bn

(1) TOBRUK GARRISON IS ON ED DUDA

(2) You will join them there SP ST ¹ & AXIS as given ²

(3) You will fire green Verey flares on approaching & they will do likewise

(4) ACK

The scheme [Inglis](#) put forward was that 44 Royal Tanks should drive at top speed on a narrow front straight to Ed Duda, passing south of the [Belhamed](#) defences, and that 19 Battalion should follow on a front of 300 yards. He hoped that the sound of the tanks would be enough to discourage opposition and did not expect

them to fire; but another reason for sending them was that he wanted them to guard 19 Battalion against tank counter-attack next day. Lieutenant-Colonel Yeo was 'unenthusiastic'³ and when Brigadier Watkins appeared on the scene (together with Freyberg) he supported Yeo's objections. As the 1 Army Tank Brigade diary says, it was 'a new conception [of] the use of Army Tanks' and Inglis says Watkins 'tried all he knew to dissuade me'.⁴ The tanks were under Inglis's command and he insisted that they go, though he was open to suggestion on details. Thereupon Watkins said, 'Well, if they have to go, I suppose that's as good a way as any'. So the question was settled and 'Yeo could not have been more co-operative than he then became.'⁵

Time was short and 19 Battalion had to withdraw from its company areas on Zaafran and form up about three miles away. Since Hartnell had first to get back and issue his orders before even these preliminaries could begin there was every reason to hurry. The unit diary says it was 7.15 p.m. when 19 Battalion started to move out from its existing area⁶ and 9.30 when it was ready to advance, a very good performance. A composite squadron of 44 Royal Tanks under Major ('Stump') Gibbon with 13 or 14 Matildas was to lead and three or four more tanks were to accompany the infantry. Freyberg said a few words to Hartnell before he returned to Division and Hartnell quoted them when he addressed his orders

¹ Starting Point; Starting Time.

² '2200 hrs GRID 409' is added in pencil, 409 grid being the axis of advance due westwards to Ed Duda.

³ Inglis, letter to Sir Howard Kippenberger, 14 Jan 1952.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Inglis, narrative, 1952. Masters (*With Pennants Flying*, p. 139) tells quite a different story, but there can be no doubting that the conception of this advance was Inglis's and the 1 Army Tk Bde diary confirms this. 'Some day somebody may remember to commend Inglis for the brilliant boldness of these plans', Bassett wrote chiefly apropos of this on 12 Dec 1941, 'and the troops for the solid dash they put into their execution'.

⁶ Leaving behind the 18-pdr troop, the Bofors guns, and the MMG platoon at [Zaafran](#) but taking two 2-pdr portées of N Troop, 34 A-Tk Bty, from C Sqn, Div Cav.

group: 'Syd, you must get there, even if you get there with only six men, and you must hang on.' ¹ Captain Thomson ² of C Company recalls looking across at Major Williams ³ of B Company and 'seeing his eyes light up at the challenge'. ⁴ The battalion plan was to advance with the three or four tanks leading, followed by two companies in line, then Advanced Headquarters with a minimum of vehicles, then the other two companies, with the carriers bringing up the rear.

At 9.30 p.m. the first wave of tanks drove off and a quarter of an hour later 19 Battalion set out. Despite [Inglis's](#) intentions the leading tanks soon found a use for their guns and the 44 Royal Tanks diary says, 'Strong enemy position was overrun and many enemy killed' and 'Enemy A/Tk guns, Fd guns and M.Gs encountered were destroyed'. But no delay resulted and in an hour and a quarter the leading tanks fired their green flares, got the correct response, and were among friends on Ed Duda.

The second wave of tanks, with 19 Battalion, reported 'No enemy fire ... all guns having been silenced by 1st Echelon' and this is confirmed by numerous post-war accounts, though it is contrary to a legend of gruesome slaughter which gained currency in the Division. The axis of advance passed just outside the strong position south of [Belhamed](#) which had caused much trouble throughout the day and there was some firing from the south; but the leading tanks had achieved their purpose and the slight fire directed at 19 Battalion was wildly inaccurate. Lieutenant Fleming, ⁵ whose platoon of C Company was on the extreme left and most likely to meet opposition, remembers none. 'It was a very dark night', he says, 'and we could just see the I Tanks occasionally. My main concern... was to keep up in line with the troops on my right.... We did, however, pass over quite a few slit trenches which appeared to be deserted, the odd shape appeared in the darkness in front and then vanished.... There seemed to be a fair amount of shooting out on our open left flank, none in front and very little on our right flank. En route we captured nothing, saw very little and suffered no casualties'. Thomson, his company commander, saw two prisoners come through and 'some of our men shooting up some apparently deserted

bivvies on the way'. He saw no fighting, however, and the one or two guns he passed had been abandoned.

¹ D.S. Thomson, letter, 11 Sep 1954.

² Capt D.S. Thomson, MC; Stratford; born Stratford, 14 Nov 1915; clerk; wounded 26 Jun 1942; p.w. 16 Jul 1942.

³ Maj E.W.S. Williams, m.i.d.; born [Wellington](#), 23 Sep 1915; Regular soldier; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

⁴ Thomson, loc. cit.

⁵ Maj Y.K. Fleming, DSO; [Auckland](#); born Dunedin, 6 Oct 1912; plastering contractor; wounded Apr 1945; now Regular soldier.

A small Italian camp yielded a few sappers as prisoners and another which was at first fired at turned out to be a dressing station or field hospital, also Italian, which according to one account provided another fifty prisoners and also contained a few captive South Africans. On the way, too, the men passed 'a group of big guns, whose barrels made grotesque outlines in the darkening sky', ¹ and their hardest task in the advance was to find ways and means of putting them out of action, which they did in the end with sledgehammers borrowed from tank crews. The 19 Battalion diary says, 'The enemy losses in equipment are known to have been eight field guns, some of large calibre, possibly 210 mm....In addition to 6 German and 4 Italian prisoners being taken we released 5 of our own Tank personnel and one 20 Bn pte being held prisoner in a compound.' One carrier was lost by some unstated means, perhaps mechanical trouble, and its crew transferred to other carriers which lacked full crews. The battalion reached its goal about 1 a.m. on the 27th without a single casualty. The legend of slaughter thus obscured the real and considerable achievement of 44 Royal Tanks and the 19th in maintaining direction in the dark across 10,000 yards of uneven and unfamiliar desert without a man or a vehicle going astray, a matter not only of navigation but of training and discipline.

Hartnell went forward to obtain instructions and eventually found Brigadier Willison of 32 Army Tank Brigade, who told him to go into reserve in a shallow wadi a mile and a half north-east of Ed Duda and rather more than two miles due west of [Belhamed](#). The men were meanwhile tired, cold and bored with waiting, and it was not until next day that they began to appreciate the historic nature of their achievement.

Behind the battalion a line-laying party of J Section, Divisional Signals, under Second-Lieutenant Brennan,² with 16,000 yards of cable, picked its way in the dark to lay by far the longest telephone line in the Division, reporting back along it from time to time to Brigade Headquarters, where [Inglis](#), Bassett, Duff, Captain Marshall³ of J Section, and others listened on a party line. On one occasion Marshall heard Bassett say, 'I wonder if the Brigadier is listening' and a gruff voice interjected, 'Too bloody right I am.' By 4 a.m. on 27 November the line was complete and Brennan reported that 19 Battalion was on Ed Duda, to the immense relief of the listeners. After this, however, the line was frequently broken by shellfire and proved almost impossible to maintain.

¹ D.W. Hodge, quoted by Sinclair, 19 Battalion, p. 210.

² Capt P.J. Brennan, MC; Opunake; born [New Plymouth](#), 12 Nov 1918.

³ Maj E.L.J. Marshall, MC, ED, m.i.d.; [Lower Hutt](#); born Coromandel, 16 May 1908; clerk.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 16 – A COSTLY NIGHT ATTACK ON SIDI REZEGH

CHAPTER 16

A Costly Night Attack on Sidi Rezegh

i

NO such bloodless victory rewarded 6 Brigade in its night attack on [Sidi Rezegh](#), and Barrowclough expected none. He got what he foresaw: a bitter fight for each rocky crag, each shingle scree, every wadi and many of the countless crevices on the stretch of the escarpment where enemy awaited his onslaught. Even his comprehensive First World War experience of violence and slaughter scarcely prepared him for what took place this night on the way to [Sidi Rezegh](#).

He needed no order from [Freyberg](#) to tell him that the ridge must be taken whatever the cost. His men could not stay where they were, overlooked from north and south and open to fire and counter-attack. Before any word came from Division he turned over in his mind the possibilities open to him and found they were few indeed. The southern escarpment, though it dominated all his left flank, could not be tackled. All his resources were needed to gain 'the high ground overlooking the MOSQUE of SIDI RESEGH'. ¹

His own headquarters had to hide in a hollow no deeper than a dewpond and when he called up his commanding officers it was to 'no secluded conference held in the security of deep dugout or steep ravine'. Seven or eight officers, Shuttleworth, Page, Allen, Burton, Weir and the Brigade Major, Barrington, among them, had to 'lie flat on the open desert with maps spread out on the ground before them', as Barrowclough says in his report. 'The slightest raising of the head immediately drew fire from the snipers and machine guns ... and shelling and mortar fire added to the discomforts.' As Burton recalls it, 'Shells were bursting nearby and pieces of flying metal and rock were whizzing by'. The telephone rang from a nearby trench and Barrington crawled over and slid gratefully below the level of the bullet-swept ground to answer it. 'Well, gentlemen,' Barrowclough announced, 'the General insists that Sidi Resegh be taken.... 24 and 26 Battalions will attack and capture Sidi Resegh tonight.' ²

¹ Barrowclough's report.

Shuttleworth and Page both pointed out that their men were weary, that the leadership of the many officers and NCOs who had been lost was 'sorely missed', and one of them added that the 25th might be committed, as it was already in position less than 2000 yards from the main objective. Burton said nothing to this, but when Barrowclough insisted that 25 Battalion must go into reserve he offered to leave it in position until 11.30 p.m. to form a firm base for the attack and his offer was accepted. With the main points settled, Shuttleworth and Page, as Barrowclough says, 'very gallantly applied themselves to the inevitable task.' To help fill the gaps left in 24 Battalion by the previous night's operation, Allen contributed his own weak A Company and a platoon of C Company of the 21st, while Burton supplied two skilled men from his own 'I' Section to help Shuttleworth. ¹ Thus all four battalions were represented in the attacking force and the troops, as Barrowclough adds, 'in spite of extreme fatigue and heavy losses ... resigned themselves to the prospects of another night's heavy fighting against obviously superior odds.'

The plan which emerged, unlike that of the previous night, was simplicity itself: 26 Battalion was to attack westwards along the escarpment as far as the Mosque while the 24th attacked north-westwards to seize the stretch between the Mosque and the lattice observation mast. Shuttleworth's task was a 'silent' frontal assault over 1000–1300 yards of almost flat desert which tilted slightly to the north-west, and for this purpose he lined up all four of his companies near his C Company position on a front of perhaps 1000 yards. ² Both units had a hot meal before the start, the first in some cases for three days, and it 'put new heart into the men', all of whom well knew they would need all the strength and resolution they could muster.

No written orders for the attack survive and accounts disagree as to the starting time; but it was probably about 11 p.m. that the men rose to their feet and began walking through the black night in fairly close order. Both battalions struck opposition almost at once, flares rose up in front of them, tracer bullets cut the intervening ground into jagged patterns of light and dark, the air was filled with a deadly rustling, whistling and shrieking, and then anti-tank guns and mortars joined

in and the streaking gun-flashes and shattering explosions told their ominous tale of an enemy ready and waiting.

¹ The remnants of A Coy, 24 Bn, had already gone to reinforce C Coy (Tomlinson).

² C Coy of 24 Bn was on the right, D centre and B on the left; where A Coy, 21 Bn, fitted into the line is a matter of dispute but it seems likely that it was on the right.

A and B Companies of the 26th came to grips with the enemy in the first wadi, getting showered with grenades as they mounted the far slopes, and charged all signs of movement. The crest gained, they rallied to the calls of their officers and NCOs and especially to Major Milliken's ¹ roars of encouragement, and then ran into more bullets and grenades as they descended into the next hollow—'all bayonet, small arms, very tough fighting', it seemed to Tolerton, the adjutant. ² Milliken of A Company was too prominent among his men to escape harm and in one of the many wadis on the way he was killed. In another Page was badly wounded. Second-Lieutenant Lamb, ³ after Milliken fell, led A Company onwards, alongside Captain [Gatenby](#) ⁴ of B Company, and in the early hours the two reached the flat ground below the Mosque and began to form a front there from the various oddments of their companies they could find in the dark. Fighting was still going on all round them and C Company had to deal with many pockets of enemy left behind in the broken ground. It was impossible to keep detachments in good order over such ground and against such a numerous and resolute enemy. Immense self-control and determination was needed to make any progress at all against one MG post after another, but the men carried on, stumbling in the darkness unevenly lit by flashes and flares, until the goal was reached. This was the 'hardest, bloodiest and most deadly attack ever staged by our Unit', according to a mortar NCO of the 26th, ⁵ and statistics support him. Behind the advance stretcher bearers and all others who could be spared found men everywhere who badly needed their help.

D Company of the 26th, luckier than the others, pressed on against comparatively slight opposition and ended up on its objective, as near as Major [Walden](#) ⁶ could judge in the dark. Sergeant [Dodds](#) ⁷ of 16 Platoon had been

particularly aggressive in leading his men through heavy MG fire to consolidate on the position Walden indicated, and at Walden's instigation he then made three sallies to check the position, bringing back valuable information.

Shortly before first light all four companies of 26 Battalion were pretty near where they were supposed to be; but opposition was still heavy and to some officers as dawn approached it looked as though a heavy counter-attack was imminent. They therefore ordered

¹ [Maj T. Milliken](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 3 Jul 1896; solicitor; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

² A rear HQ had been set up on the starting line to keep in touch with Brigade and with the companies by wireless, while Page and a small HQ travelled in the middle of his attacking force.

³ 2 Lt F. G. S. Lamb; born Methven, 22 Feb 1918; clerk; died of wounds 28 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Capt C. Gatenby](#), MBE; [Nelson](#); born England, 5 Feb 1912; orchardist; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; escaped, [Italy](#), Sep 1943; wounded, [Anzio](#), 5 Feb 1944.

⁵ M. A. Cameron.

⁶ [Maj E. F. Walden](#), ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 16 Feb 1911; brewer; p.w. 4 Sep 1942.

⁷ [Capt G. M. Dodds](#), DCM; [Mosgiel](#); born North Taieri, 29 Dec 1910; bricklayer.

a short withdrawal to the more defensible crest of the escarpment; but the move soon got out of hand, in the absence of the many officers and NCOs who had fallen in the course of the advance, and two companies went by mistake right back to their starting line. D Company took no part in this move and when day broke

Walden found his men far from the rest of the battalion. The mistaken withdrawal, however, provided manpower on something like the scale required for carrying back the dozens of wounded. Warily the men climbed the slopes and made their way back, 'The most sad set-up I have ever seen or could ever see', says Cameron.¹ 'We placed the wounded all together and there were approximately 100.' When Tolerton discovered what had happened he turned the two companies round and sent them forward once more towards the Mosque, this time in daylight. It proved a very different journey from the first: the ridges were strangely silent, with only the cry here and there of a wounded man lying in some hidden hollow, and the enemy was either dead or gone. From the plumed hats of those lying dead they were identified as Bersaglieri, and closer examination showed them to be of the 9th Regiment. Many of those who went through this night and saw these dead foes in the morning had occasion sharply to revise their opinion of Italians as fighting men.²

The advance of 24 Battalion across the flat was, if anything, a grimmer ordeal for some platoons than that of the 26th along the escarpment. The men came under fire almost at once and on the right, as Tomlinson says, had 'hand-to-hand fighting practically all the way to our objective.' The enemy fought their guns to the last. 'Few prisoners were taken that night as all Coys were so below strength by this time that we simply had not got the men to look after them', he adds. Ferguson of A Company of the 21st found himself under MG and mortar fire from three sides and he was urging his men through it when he received orders to 'drop back a little and dig in till dawn'. D Company of the 24th, like its counterpart of the 26th, seems to have missed most of the shooting on the way and had begun to dig in on the escarpment south-west of the Mosque before it attracted much attention. Then on a 'bare forward slope', Private [Shakespeare](#)³ says, 'enemy fire became murderous, machine gun, anti-tank, and mortar fire from directly ahead. The Coy was cut to pieces.'

¹ Sgt M. A. Camerson; [Temuka](#); born [Temuka](#), 18 Dec 1916; signwriter; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

² Though their methods were not always admired. As Cameron of 26 Bn mortar platoon says, some of them were 'screaming "Amigo, Amigo", with one hand up and the other on the machine gun.'

³ Pte W. R. A. Shakespear; Whangaparaoa, North Auckland; born NZ 26 Sep 1915; farmer; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

The men put up piles of stones where the ground would not respond to their picks and Shakespear, who had managed to dig down a few inches, was hit through the elbow when he raised his arm to reach his pick. His account outlines a grim picture:

I lay quietly as the firing started again. Nothing could live above ground. It eased again, and Pte. G. Whyte ¹ and Pte. Cain ² got up to put more stones around their shallow slit trench, machine gun fire killed them both. Pte. Milstead, ³ a splendid soldier, and several others were wounded, Saddleton ⁴ and Burgess ⁵ among them.... I have since wondered why the order was given to halt at that particular mark, as we could do nothing, whereas had we dropped back into a wadi, many lives might have been saved.

On the extreme left of the 24th, however, B Company had a charmed life and struck very little opposition. When dawn came it moved forward in extended order to the crest of the escarpment, passing on the way many Bersaglieri and 'a number of our chaps', according to Private Bott, 'as well as two of our chaps sitting up wounded and groaning'. Captain Wallace, ⁶ temporarily in command, stood up and waved his revolver when he saw what was meant to be a white flag ahead and some thirty Italians stepped forward to surrender without a shot fired. 'We then dumped our greatcoats', Bott continues, and 'moved forward along the ridge.'

The rest of 24 Battalion, nearer the Mosque, had a much harder time when day broke. The Mosque itself was still in enemy hands and 'as daylight improved one could see them ... running round their built up dug-outs', according to Lynn of D Company. This company was ordered to open rapid fire and did so, but was at once assailed by fire from three tanks which appeared as if from nowhere. To 17 Platoon on an exposed forward slope this was disastrous, as Corporal Opie ⁷ explains:

as dawn came, enemy fire including cannon became more accurate. An enemy tank right in front of our Pl began to play havoc with the breast-works of rock etc put up by us and we suffered heavily. We had no A Tk weapon with us at the time.... As I

could see that we would be slaughtered one by one if we stayed where we were, I ordered the PI to withdraw, which we did, successfully, under cover of the smoke and dust which by this time enshrouded our positions. We later re-occupied these positions without resistance other than shelling, and buried the dead.

¹ Pte J. Whyte; born NZ 24 Apr 1918; labourer; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

² Pte E. W. Cains; born Shannon, 26 Oct 1914; bushman; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

³ Pte J. F. Millstead; Auckland; born NZ 27 Jul 1919; labourer; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

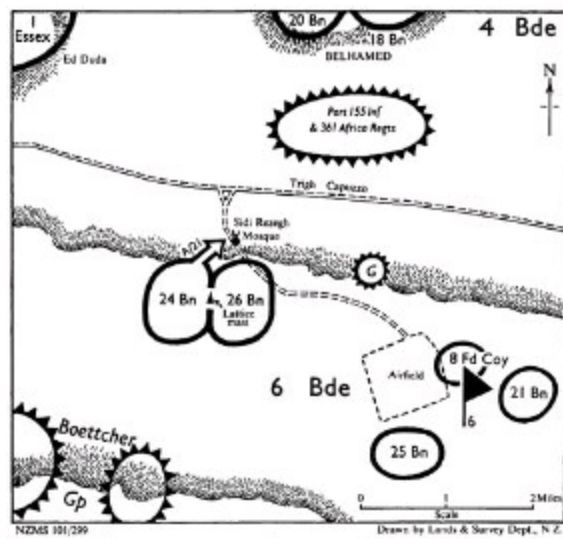
⁴ Pte R. H. Saddleton; born NZ 1 May 1911; farm manager; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁵ Pte G. Burgess; Hamilton; born Tauranga, 1 May 1919; storeman; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁶ Capt T. Wallace, m.i.d.; born NZ 19 Feb 1907; farmer; killed in action 28 Nov 1941.

⁷ Cpl A. C. Opie; Mokouiti, Te Kuiti; born Eltham, 2 Jun 1916; farmer; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

One or two 2-pounders, probably of 65 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, eventually came forward and drove the tanks off. But the task of the tanks seems to have been to cover a withdrawal of the remaining enemy infantry and in this they succeeded. As Tomlinson says, under cover of these tanks the enemy 'collected his transport on the road at the foot of the escarpment'—the Trigh Capuzzo. 'The transport was packed tight and they were embussing their troops', he adds. 'It was a gunner's dream but out of range of our small-arms fire.' Tomlinson sent back a runner with this information but before an FOO could get forward the enemy drove off.



'SIDI REZEGH IS OURS'— MORNING 27 NOVEMBER

The enemy's departure was expedited by A Company of 21 Battalion, operating somewhere on Tomlinson's right flank but without his knowledge. Captain Ferguson and his fifty men mounted an attack with artillery support and charged down the slopes towards the Mosque, where some Germans and Italians were to be seen. 'They fought well', he says, and his own company 'suffered many more casualties ... and was down to 30 or 40.' This was probably part of the enemy thought by some of 26 Battalion to be preparing a counter-attack; but A Company of the 21st 'cleaned up the place and got into defensive positions', according to Ferguson. 'The enemy withdrew....' Later in the morning Ferguson was reinforced by the remnants of 15 Platoon of his battalion, which had been attached to the 24th for the night but had been held in reserve. When the enemy departed a strang quietness descended on the scene, and for the first time since 23 November the men were under no danger from bullets or mortars and had only an occasional incoming shell to worry about. They began to realise with mixed but deep feelings that, as Tomlinson puts it, 'Sidi Rezegh was ours.'

ii

At Brigade Headquarters only scraps of information came through during the night and Barrowclough learned that 4 Brigade had reached Ed Duda long before he could be sure his own troops had reached their objective. At 8.15 a.m. on the 27th the IO, Captain Moffatt,¹ jotted down notes from a telephone or wireless conversation with 26 Battalion which indicated that one company was 'among

derelict vehicles on ridge' somewhere short of the Mosque and that 24 Battalion had got 'further forward' on the left, though the 26th were 'still advancing'. This suggested only partial success; but the enemy appeared to be retreating, covered by the three tanks. Then at 8.30 a.m. word came from 24 Battalion to the effect that opposition on the left had dissolved ('enemy apparently pulled out during night') but was continuing in the Mosque area; the unit was then 'lining edge of escarpment facing NORTH WEST' and the Mosque was just below C Company. In this area, however, there were 'signs of heavy fighting—26 Bn + A.C.D. [Companies] of 24. Many dead Italians. Our people dead under muzzles of Italians.' Looking to the north-west, the 24th thought they could see enemy on Ed Duda; but in this they were fortunately mistaken.

Barrowclough had waited impatiently during the night for news of the attack and at first light went forward to see for himself. It was a heart-breaking scene which met his eyes, as he wrote a few days later:

The Bde Commander's recce at daylight of the SIDI RESEGH position revealed how stubborn had been the fighting there. The night attack brought our troops right forward to the positions selected as their objectives but necessarily left them in a much more confined area than it was advisable to occupy as daylight came. The kernel of the position had been captured in the darkness but still more heavy fighting was necessary in the expansion movement that was initiated when there was light enough.... It soon became apparent that both the night attack and the subsequent dawn expansion movement had met with the severest possible opposition. The enemy forces comprised a number of Germans and troops of the

¹ Maj W. Moffat; [Christchurch](#); born [Scotland](#), 12 Jan 1905; schoolmaster.

9 Bersaglieri Regt (Italian). Both were plentifully supplied with machine guns and anti-tank guns and it was clear that our troops had had to advance right to the muzzles of these guns before their crews were despatched and the guns silenced. There was an enormous number of dead and wounded all over the battlefield. A significant feature was the sight of many men who had been hit by the solid shot of A Tk guns fired at point blank range. These projectiles had torn large portions of flesh from the bodies of their unfortunate victims and it would be hard to imagine a

more unpleasant sight or a more heavily contested battlefield. The Bersaglieri Regt fought with much greater determination than is usually found among Italian troops and the numbers of their dead and the positions in which they lay showed that they had kept their guns in action to the last. Indeed it was reported from several of our men that the first to break under our onslaught were the German Troops and that the Bersaglieri had been the last to yield. It was against such opposition as this that the exhausted and sadly depleted ranks of 24 and 26 Bns had fought their way to victory and their victory was complete.

After the first blessed relief from fire and danger, however, the battalions began to count the cost of their achievement and they found it tragically high. Officers were now few and far between. B Company of the 24th had only one, Wallace, and the company outnumbered its thirty prisoners only slightly if at all. C Company of the same unit had two officers, Tomlinson and Lieutenant Nathan, one sergeant, and 32 other ranks. D Company had one officer, the unshakably cheerful Captain Jones; Corporal Opie, who had stopped two bullets during the attack, one of them through his big toe, and could not now wear a boot on that foot, was second-in-command of the company and also commanded 17 Platoon. Opie's platoon was down to 16 men and the company to 37 by his own account, though a private of the company, [Till](#),¹ made this note in his diary:

Moved up again. Only 25 left at roll call. Settled down for first night's rest. Had hot meal—cooks doing good job.

Only four officers thus remained forward in the companies of 24 Battalion, though Ferguson and Lieutenant [Hutchinson](#)² of the 21st were still with them; Captain Brown soon came back from the ADS against medical advice to resume command of B Company, and several other officers also became available this day or the next. Shuttleworth himself was here, there and everywhere and he did much to restore confidence, reorganise his troops, and put new heart in those whose spirits had flagged. The condition of 24 Battalion may be measured by the fact that the 25th, by far the weakest of the three 6 Brigade battalions before this attack, felt able to contribute several men later in the day to reinforce Shuttleworth's D Company. The 26th was a little better off, but

¹ Pte R. E. Till; Te Kauwhata, [Waikato](#); born [Te Kuiti](#), 11 May 1913; farmer; wounded 28 Nov 1941.

² Capt C. P. Hutchinson, MBE; [London](#); born England, 25 Jun 1906; barrister's clerk; p.w. Nov 1941.

not much. Its total strength was now a little over 300; but this included many in headquarters or B Echelon, and the rifle companies, particularly A and B, were pitifully thin.

The battalions suffered moreover the anguish of losing many men whose gallantry and self-sacrifice had won all hearts in the fighting of the preceding days, and it seemed to many of the survivors that the enemy, in losing his last foothold at [Sidi Rezegh](#), had maliciously skimmed off the cream of their unit. One was [CSM Wall](#) ¹ of D Company of the 24th, who from the moment he first set foot on Hill 175 had acted without a thought for himself. 'We felt it hard having to bury [Sgt-Mjr Wall](#)', a private of his company remarks, 'so gave him a soldier's funeral by letting him have his equipment on which was contrary to orders but made an exception of him as he was one of the best of soldiers.' In the same company Sergeant [Constable](#) ² was already a legendary figure because of his reckless disregard of shot and shell to the point that many felt only a miracle would preserve him safely through the campaign. No such miracle occurred. He was 'too game and brave', according to one; 'a one-man infantry battalion.' Shakespear, who did not even know Constable except by repute, felt constrained afterwards to write to his parents 'that they might know of his example on the field.' These and many more of the 24th fell this night and in the 26th it was much the same. Major Milliken was among those much mourned and the severe wounding of Colonel Page was felt as a shock throughout the unit.

The comparative quiet of the morning served to emphasise the violence of the preceding days and the bitterness of these losses and, with time to think, the spirits of many of the men were depressed. A private by his own account saw Captain [Carnachan](#) ³ of the 24th this mornign and 'told him we'd had it and must rest', and Carnachan himself comments, 'Men very exhausted—re-organise.' Lieutenant [Nottle](#) ⁴ of A Company of the 26th thought that lack of sleep was the main cause of falling

morale, but even in 25 Battalion, which had spent the night in reserve, Major Burton found on his morning rounds that a change had come over his men:

A group of lads were sitting around a billy of tea. They asked me to join them.... These boys were just beginning to realise that most of their pals had gone forever. The realisation was hitting them hard ... here today with no shells bursting around them and with a little time to gather their scattered wits, they were thinking and wondering why....

¹ [WO II J. L. Wall](#); born England, 19 Nov 1906; labourer; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

² [Sgt F. H. Constable](#); born England, 2 Jul 1914; dairy farmer; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

³ [Capt J. L. G. Carnachan](#); [Auckland](#); born [Waihi](#), 4 Dec 1903; school teacher; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Capt R. A. Nottle](#); [Nelson](#); born Westport, 28 Jan 1917; clerk; p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

One of the group with tears shining in his eyes said 'Can you tell me Sir why good blokes like Capt Roberts, Ben Morris and Bert Goodlands ¹ and that fine kid [McCauley](#) ² should be struck down?'

Another group was 'almost as pessimistic' and Burton quickly arranged for some work to keep them all busy and in his quiet way swung morale upwards again.

Though deeply affected himself by the sights he saw on the battlefield, Brigadier Barrowclough could not allow any slackening of effort. From the high ground above the Mosque he surveyed the whole front attentively and could see enemy only in an area three miles to the west, though much farther still he could see the flashes of guns which he assumed were shelling [Tobruk](#). The nearer enemy was shelled, but rain squalls sweeping down from the north obscured the results. Though Ed Duda was captured the wide gap between there and [Sidi Rezegh](#) left him open to attack

from the north as well as the west and the south, and he disposed his resources accordingly, with 26 Battalion facing north from the lattice mast eastwards and the 24th facing north and west on the western part of the escarpment, though it did not extend right to the end. The total position stretched roughly 1000 yards east and west of the mast and 600 yards north and south of it, making a box 2000 yards by 1200, with the artillery and B Echelons stretching out behind the undefended eastern flank. Most of the vehicles were in the neighbourhood of the airfield or in a large wadi north of it and they tended to shuffle westwards closer to the fighting units.

In the Blockhouse area 8 Field Company lifted about 100 mines which had been detected there and then moved to the eastern edge of the airfield. There was no suggestion that this company should lay mines in defence of the newly-gained positions above the Mosque, though three miles away at Ed Duda RE parties were busily preparing minefields in front of 1 Essex, who were strengthening their positions with barbed wire. The Tobruk garrison was 'anti-tank mine conscious' but the New Zealanders were not.

iii

[Freyberg](#) and Scobie were now within reach of each other and their troops were in contact, but communications remained slow even within their respective commands. Scobie did not get word from Willison of the presence of 44 Royal Tanks and 19 Battalion at Ed Duda until after 1 p.m. [Freyberg](#), though he knew the 19th had reached their objective, was not sure that they had linked with

¹ [Cpl H. E. Goodland](#); born [Christchurch](#), 16 Mar 1909; journalist; killed in action 26 Nov 1941.

² [L-Cpl A. A. MacAulay](#); born [Scotland](#), 9 Mar 1918; railway porter; killed in action 23 Nov 1941.

the garrison until some hours later and signalled at 11.45 a.m. that he was 'holding firmly ED DUDA and [BELHAMED](#)'. This drew from Scobie at 1.10 p.m. the

following reply:

Your infantry are NOT repeat NOT on ED DUDA.... I am holding this strongly but require earliest relief....

Scobie was naturally worried about the length of the perimeter he now held and expected the New Zealand Division to take over at least the Ed Duda sector. Godwin-Austen signalled at 1.07 p.m., however, that 'Present situation makes it impossible [for the New Zealanders] to do more than hold the ground they have gained' and made Scobie responsible for 'establishing the corridor and for holding it open at all costs'. To this Scobie responded generously at 2.30 p.m.:

Corridor is open. Will do our best to maintain it so.

At 3.20 p.m. Scobie finally confirmed that 44 Royal Tanks and 19 Battalion were indeed with his own troops at Ed Duda and signalled [Freyberg](#) accordingly.

With misunderstandings on this scale about even the most elementary features of the situation, requiring hours of patient work among cipher clerks and signalmen or hazardous journeys by LOs or DRs, there was no hope of immediate and decisive result from the link-up between the two divisions. Before Scobie and [Freyberg](#) could reach a closer understanding of each other's position and press on according to Godwin-Austen's plan towards [El Adem](#), evidence began to accumulate of a growing threat of armoured counter-attack on the [Tobruk](#) corridor, and the domestic problems this created in each division made closer co-ordination between the two even harder to achieve, though it made collaboration between the two all the more essential.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 17 – ROMMEL'S 'EVIL DREAM'

CHAPTER 17

Rommel's 'Evil Dream'

i

THE struggle to establish the [Tobruk Corridor](#) had gone on in a separate compartment of the campaign from that in which Rommel was operating and, despite crossed lines of communication, interaction between the two remained at a remarkably low level. [Freyberg](#) and Scobie knew next to nothing of what the German armour was doing and an event as important as the dismissal of the Eighth Army Commander took place without their knowledge. So far as 13 Corps knew, the Axis tank strength was too low for decisive action and the revived power of the British armour was well able to deal with it. But relative tank strengths gave no good guide to the fighting ability of [15 Panzer Division](#), which was still stronger than the British armour and able to stage a counter-attack against the Corridor of far greater weight than [Freyberg](#) and Scobie envisaged. If [21 Panzer Division](#) had not been reduced in the mean-time to a shadow of its former strength they would probably have faced disaster.

ii

The dash to the frontier, in the opinion of Rommel's closest associates, was a mistake; but on 25 November it was not an irretrievable one. Rommel could well exploit the panicky situation in the rear areas of Eighth Army by seizing huge stocks of military supplies and cutting supply routes, by crippling the [RAF](#) fighter force while it lay helpless on the ground, and by spreading chaos and dismay in widening circles until crusader became submerged (as Cunningham feared it might) in anxieties for the safety of Egypt. But he chose instead to attack objectives which were either unprofitable or illusory.

With Cruewell and Gause, however, he first had to avoid capture by one of many British detachments near where he spent an uncomfortable night somewhere north of [Maddalena](#). In this he was lucky, and early on the 25th his little group made its way northwards unmolested, crossed the Wire, and joined Cruewell's tiny headquarters at Gasr el Abid.

In the light of the latest information, which was sparse, Rommel and Cruewell then conferred on their next step. Ariete had been delayed and was not at hand to help surround the British forces Rommel believed were besieging his frontier garrisons, and there was no news of Trieste Division, but he could not afford to wait. Through Cruewell he therefore ordered 15 Panzer to attack these British forces from the north-west and drive them on to the mine-fields, deploying for this purpose on a wide front between [Sidi Omar](#) and [Sidi Azeiz](#) and raising clouds of dust to give the impression of greater strength than Neumann-Silkow actually possessed. At the same time 21 Panzer was to attack from the south-east with its greatest force on the left at [Sidi Omar](#). He also conceived of a thrust by a mixed force southwards to seize Jarabub, to cut the L of C of the British force reported to be deep into the hinterland of [Cyrenaica](#) and threatening Jalo and Aujila. But he gave no thought to Eighth Army Headquarters, nor to the huge supply depots which must exist in the neighbourhood, nor even to the nearby landing grounds from which the [RAF](#) fighters operated. The raid to Bir Habata by 33 Reconnaissance Unit, which he had ordered the previous night, had not yet started for lack of petrol and ammunition and Cruewell reported accordingly; but this evoked no comment from Rommel, whose interests were firmly fixed on a largely non-existent enemy to the north.

Rommel was accustomed to giving orders on broad lines, leaving the details for the Panzer Group or [Africa Corps](#) staffs to fill in; but in this case no staff worthy of the name was at hand and the nebulous nature of the enemy he proposed to attack, which would have been disclosed to trained staff officers by the lack of specific information as to units and locations, remained obscured. It did not even emerge in this discussion that both panzer divisions were badly situated to carry out their share of his new scheme. Having prepared to attack northwards, 15 Panzer would now have to draw back, rearrange all its march schedules, and deploy on a different front from that envisaged the previous night. Unless this division was quickly and effectively committed to action in the frontier area, however, most of the effect of the operation as a whole on the minds of the senior British commanders (if Rommel was in fact aiming at their minds) would be lost.

Instead of striking thin air Rommel might have made it his business to get in touch with Major-General de Giorgis at [Bir Ghirba](#) and find out from him all he could about the British dispositions in the frontier area, concerting with Savona Division a

course of action based on knowledge rather than intuition. By so doing Rommel would have learned that Omar Nuovo and all but the western part of Libyan Omar had fallen into British hands. But he seems not to have known where de Giorgis was. Rommel's orders and later accounts strongly suggest that he thought the southern anchor of his frontier line was still intact, though threatened by mobile forces of some size. 'South and east of [Sidi Omar](#) an enemy group of considerable strength with much artillery had been recognised', Kriebel says in his post-war narrative, and this evidently refers to 4/11 Sikh and 1 Field Regiment, RA. ¹

These two units were east of the Omars at first light, getting ready to move but not ready to fight where they were. When what looked like twenty-five German tanks ² fired on a troop of the field regiment at 7.30 a.m., there followed anxious moments until the tanks withdrew out of range. The guns were then hastily dug in where the ground permitted, and where it was too hard they went into action without any sort of cover.

Meanwhile Cruewell had passed Rommel's orders on to von Ravenstein near [Halfaya](#) and then ran across Colonel Stephan of 5 Panzer Regiment and told him to report at once with his regiment to Headquarters of 21 Panzer. This meant driving north-eastwards, either through or round the British force with which the tanks had already clashed, though Stephan may not have been fully aware of this. But the matter was soon afterwards taken out of Stephan's hands by the [RAF](#), which strafed his columns and inflicted wounds on him from which he later died.

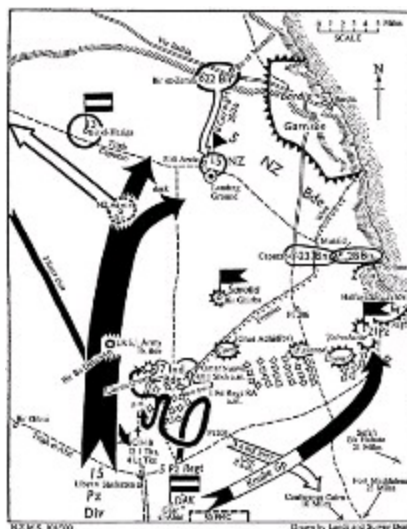
Major Milderbrath of I Battalion assumed command of the regiment and, continuing the move, soon found himself at grips with a force he at first underestimated. With his much-weakened tank force and practically no supporting weapons, he was in no position to press on against a regiment of 25-pounders firing over open sights; but he was given little choice, since the British gunners, in desperate defence of 4/11 Sikh, held their fire until the tanks were at almost point-blank range. The tanks came on against the eastern flank of the infantry and the gun area of 52 Field Battery, opening fire at 2000 yards and imposing a severe strain on the nerves of gunners crouched behind their gunshields awaiting the word to engage. Many gunners were hit; but the guns lay silent. The tanks halted from time to time to bring their cannon to bear, then advanced again with machine guns blazing. One or two guns were knocked out but even this could not provoke the

others to open fire prematurely. Then, when the tanks were no more than 500

¹ 4/11 Sikh had formed up outside the minefields to escort supplies to 5 NZ Bde, and though this mission had been cancelled the unit was still outside the defences. 1 Fd Regt, RA, was poised to tackle the 'raiding parties' which had crossed into Egypt, in conjunction with CIH.

² At that time 5 Pz Regt had only 17 'runners', including 15 Pzkw III and one Pzkw IV. B Sqn, 44 R Tks, also engaged this enemy south of [Sheferzen](#).

yards from the nearest 25-pounders, the gunners leapt into action and their solid shot tore apart the armour of the leading tanks. To the tank crews the desert looked alive with gun flashes, and after a few minutes of punishing in-fighting they turned back to the shelter of a low ridge some 400 yards to the west. Meanwhile 4/11 Sikh and much transport in the area slipped away through the minefields into the two [Omar](#) forts. The tanks carried on the fight from their new positions but without supporting arms they were greatly handicapped.



A WASTED DAY AT THE FRONTIER, 25 NOVEMBER

Quickly thinking things over, Mildebrath decided to swing to the right round the flank of the British force and then make his way to [Halfaya](#) as originally ordered; but even this course was denied him. The gun position was more extensive than he thought and the intended outflanking move became a frontal assault which met the

full force of the guns of 52 Battery and a troop of 11 Field Battery. Some tanks got to within 300 yards, but at this range the 25-pounder fire was too much and they broke away to the south-east, 'with the vengeful guns buffeting them', as the history of 4 Indian Division says. 'Seven smashed tanks dotted the plain, and troops of South African anti-tank gunners, which arrived too late to join the action, finished off another as it hobbled away.'¹ Thus arguments in many an artillery mess about what would happen in a 'straight-out' clash between panzers and 25-pounders were settled in favour of the latter. As the battle report of 5 Panzer Regiment adds, 'Most of the regiment's remaining tanks and guns also received some battle scar' and tank ammunition was running low.

The price the gunners paid for their success was sadly in evidence to Lieutenant-Colonel Dobree of 1 Field Regiment, RA, and others who toured the battlefield after the Germans had gone. It was 'exactly like some of the more gruesome Gunner battle pictures that one used to see on the walls of messes', Dobree says: 'damaged guns, bits of limbers, blown up ammunition, dead and wounded everywhere.'² Of 66 casualties all told, 42 were in 52 Field Battery (out of 73 in that battery who were in action this day). Five guns were knocked out, but all were repaired and back in action next day.

The setback suffered here, however, was only the beginning of a series of misfortunes which beset 5 Panzer Regiment. The next was five miles north-east of Gasr el Abid, where Mildebrath finally reassembled his force, with only nine tanks fully battleworthy. The regiment had begun to refuel and stock up with ammunition when 'two bombing raids in quick succession scattered the transport.'³ Then Mildebrath was confronted with the formidable presence of his commander-in-chief, who had no time for tales of woe and ordered him to 'attack north towards the enemy columns south of the frontier, to break through on a wide front, and to halt in sight of the frontier wire'.⁴ Since the frontier wire ran northwards as far as Libyan Omar and then veered eastwards this could only have the effect of bringing the regiment up against the [Omar](#)

¹ [Fourth Indian Division](#), pp. 96–7.

² [Royal Artillery Commemoration Book, 1939–1945](#), p. 192.

³ 5 Pz Regt battle report.

⁴ Ibid.

defences; but it seems unlikely that Rommel meant Mildebrath to attack these and he probably imagined them to be still in Axis hands. By driving northwards Mildebrath would push the British on to the minefields outside the Omar forts and force them to surrender, or so Rommel hoped.

The unlucky major could not argue with Rommel and had to do the best he could. If his orders entailed attacking Libyan Omar then he would attack; but it was quite impossible to do so on a 'wide front' as his regiment was now down to the strength of about 'a reinforced company'¹ and his communications were altogether too tenuous to cover a wide area. Three damaged tanks were towed forward to bolster up his dwindling fire power and, though still short of ammunition and petrol, he set off northwards soon after 1 p.m.

His determination may have deserved a change of luck but did not get it. After a brush with the five remaining tanks of 42 Royal Tanks, Mildebrath pushed on until he came upon what looked like a 'position about 12 km wide along the frontier' but was actually the two Omars, with which he was evidently unfamiliar. To the mystification of the defenders of Omar Nuovo ('Frongia'), who expected the enemy to know where their own minefields were, 5 Panzer Regiment steadily closed in on them and seemed likely to try to charge through the minefields. To the infantry it was evident that the contest, when it started in earnest, would be between the German tanks and the defending guns, and they rose from their trenches to get a better view.

When the tanks reached a low ridge 1000 yards away the guns of 25 Field Regiment, RA, flashed and thundered into action and the heavier shells of 68 Medium Regiment, RA, were soon bursting among the attackers. Five tanks were knocked out, two of them blazing wrecks, and as Mildebrath swung west two more were set on fire. With his regiment dissolving in front of his eyes, he ordered the remnants to rally to the south; but II Battalion did not receive this order because wireless aerials had been shot away. It managed to gain the lee of the enemy

pocket still holding out in the west of Libyan Omar and eventually entered there to recuperate. Mildebrath now had only ten tanks left, and only three in fighting order.² This small band took up its station halfway between Bir Sheferzen and [Sidi Omar](#) in complete isolation from the rest of Rommel's force and found to its further dismay that on the C-in-C's orders its supply lorries had joined in with those

¹ 5 Pz Regt battle report.

² Some 15 tanks all told had got into the western part of Libyan Omar and did not rejoin the regiment until some days later, minus eight lost in the meantime in other misadventures.

of 15 Panzer to simulate an attack. Rommel had gained nothing by interfering here and for most practical purposes 5 Panzer Regiment had ceased to exist.

The operations of [15 Panzer Division](#) this day were scarcely more successful. Heavy air attacks persisted for some time in the morning and caused many casualties. Before 9 a.m. Rommel ordered Neumann-Silkow to advance at once with his right flank level with Libyan Omar; on reaching there he was to deploy over a wide front stretching northwards to [Sidi Azeiz](#) to 'hem in the enemy in the [Sollum](#) area'.¹ This again suggests that he expected Libyan Omar to be in friendly hands and he was aiming at an enemy he thought faced the frontier line between there and the coast.² Even so it was a tall order, and Neumann-Silkow promptly disbanded the force he had formed on Corps orders to carry out Ariete's blocking role in the [Bir Gibni](#) area, so as to have more troops to cover the 20 miles between Libyan Omar and [Sidi Azeiz](#). He also ignored the Corps order to supply the infantry battalion, guns, and other detachments required for the excursion to Jarabub and thus put paid to this scheme, which might have had far more favourable repercussions from the German point of view than anything else Rommel at present contemplated. To add a further impression of strength the supply lorries were also added to the battle array of 15 Panzer, to the detriment of their proper role.

All this took time, however, especially under air attack, and refuelling caused further delay. It was 1.45 p.m. before the division got properly under way, half an hour later it clashed briefly with British tanks, and at 3 p.m. 8 Panzer Regiment came

up against what looked like a 'strong enemy force' but which was actually the Light Recovery Section of 1 Army Tank Brigade.

This was in a hollow near [Bir Bu Deheua](#) and in it Matildas damaged in the attack on the Omars on 22 November were under repair, some eighteen tanks in various stages of serviceability.³ Four could not move at all. Crews were quickly made up (when word arrived of the approach of the panzer force) of fitters, wounded men, and the few experienced crew members at hand, and they did what they could to manoeuvre their tanks into fighting positions. As they mounted the sides of the hollow, however, the panzers were already closing in and brought them under concentrated fire. It was a one-sided fight, with the '88s' and field howitzers joining in; but the 15 Panzer diary does not suggest this: 'After hard fighting

¹ 15 Pz Div diary.

² The German documents say ' [Sidi Omar](#)', which was the name used for the position at Libyan Omar, and this has confused some authors.

³ Part of C Sec, NZ Div Amn Coy, under [Capt F. G. Butt](#) had left [Sidi Azeiz](#) this morning for 50 FMC and ran into 15 Pz Div. See Llewellyn, [Journey Towards Christmas](#), pp. 136–9.

at very close range, 16 Mark II tanks were knocked out and a number of prisoners taken from 6 Army Tk Regt'.¹ The division nevertheless lost three tanks this day and probably in this action, and when it moved off again an hour later it was already too late to do much else. By 8 p.m. the spearhead of the division was on the Trigh Capuzzo west of [Sidi Azeiz](#) and the tail not far north of the Trigh el-Abd, and on this thin line nearly 20 miles long it bedded down for the night, facing east. Its tank strength is listed as 53, practically all the tanks now left in [Africa Corps](#).

General Neumann-Silkow had suffered all day from a shortage of petrol and at 12.30 p.m., when he reported 'enemy in strength at [Sidi Azeiz](#)', he had been ordered to attack with his 'main body' and destroy this force; but it was far more urgent to refuel and restock with ammunition. Though a 'large supply column' reached him during the night, practically no supplies got through to 21 Panzer and this division, in

the euphemistic words of the [Africa Corps](#) diary, 'had not yet succeeded' by midday 'in assembling its forces and launching a unified attack'. General von Ravenstein with a small headquarters group was at 'Faltenbacher' strongpoint south-west of [Halfaya](#), 5 Panzer Regiment was in course of dissolution, and Knabe Group 'on the way to the division, but apparently engaged against its will in fighting east of [Sidi Omar](#)'. Von Ravenstein succeeded in assembling a battalion to attack [Capuzzo](#) early in the afternoon but it could not do so, also for lack of petrol. Later in the afternoon Knabe joined him but he, too, was in urgent need of fuel.

Air attacks meanwhile continued and caused heavy loss to 33 Reconnaissance Unit, as well as destroying all wireless sets at Corps Headquarters except the one in the ACV. Late in the afternoon Rommel cancelled the Bir Habata operation, which had not yet started, and told 33 Unit instead to block a six-mile stretch of the frontier wire south of Gasr el Abid; but Neumann-Silkow, not knowing this unit had been removed from his command, ordered it to protect his rear near [Sidi Azeiz](#) and it did so. Thus Rommel was thwarted from all angles and achieved nothing. The stubbornness which was invaluable when he was actually at grips with a foe was a paralysing disability in circumstances such as these. He may have realised as the day advanced that Omar Nuovo and at least part of Libyan Omar were in British hands; but he still thought that much of the frontier line between there and the sea was besieged by New Zealanders and Indians and at 9.25 p.m. sent the following order to Cruewell: 'Destroy the enemy pockets

¹ Some 45 men were lost in this action on the British side, all but two of them captured and most of them from 42 R Tks. See Masters, pp. 116–20.

on either side of the [Sollum](#) front. Main weight on [Sidi Omar](#) [i.e., Libyan Omar]. Protect your rear communications.' This was the mixture as before; and Neumann-Silkow and von Ravenstein were beginning to find that it tasted bitter.

Back at Gasr el Abid the small Corps Headquarters did its best to keep up the normal staff routine and by a roundabout way through 21 Panzer received a signal from Westphal at [El Adem](#) at 9.45 a.m. on the 25th stating that attacks had broken through the centre of Boettcher Group, opening a gap between Trento and Pavia

which he was plugging with elements of [Trieste](#). Westphal feared a concurrent extension of the [Tobruk](#) garrison's operations to join hands and asked for a panzer division to intervene at once. This message did not reach Cruewell until 4 p.m. and Rommel did not receive it until 10.30 a.m. on the 26th.

Cruewell had feared that such a situation might arise at [Tobruk](#) when he first learned of the frontier scheme and his war diary sets out his view:

The situation in front of [Tobruk](#) proved that, although the enemy had been defeated in the hard fighting on 23 Nov, he had not yet been destroyed, and therefore full advantage had not been taken of the early successes. Pz Gp, contrary to the advice of the Corps Commander, had taken the surprising step of moving [Africa Corps](#) away to the [Sollum](#) front, quitting the battlefield and the vast quantity of captured material there. The enemy had thus been able to reassemble, retake much of the equipment and weapons he had lost, and reorganise his forces.

Thus he did not realise that the forces in question were fresh and independent of those he had defeated. In particular, he had not identified them as the New Zealand Division, though he strongly suspected that the garrison at [Sidi Azeiz](#) was a New Zealand brigade with 'part of an Indian division with a large number of Mk II tanks' – a most flattering estimate of Hargest's headquarters group. His proposals for next day, however, were sound and for 5 New Zealand Brigade ominous. They were to destroy the force at [Sidi Azeiz](#), clear [Capuzzo](#), and 'ensure supplies for both Pz divisions from stores at [Bardia](#)', to attack with 21 Panzer from the east with the main weight (as Rommel specified) at Libyan Omar, and to get ready the group destined for Jarabub. Ariete was known at 5.15 p.m. to be 'attacking an enemy force but meeting heavy resistance' and was therefore left out of these calculations.

Rommel was impatient with the lack of progress by 21 Panzer and signalled his intention of supervising the operations of this division personally next morning, starting at 7.15 a.m. 'Knabe is not to go on with his task ¹ without express orders from me', he

¹ Of hemming in the frontier forts from the south.

added. But Cruewell was now certain that no British troops faced him except at the Omars and at [Capuzzo](#) and [Sidi Azeiz](#). Neumann-Silkow would deal with the last and [Capuzzo](#) would require perhaps a battalion. Thus Ravenstein would have troops to spare, and at 8.10 p.m. Cruewell asked him to send these to a specified point (perhaps [Habata](#)) 'to cut the enemy's withdrawal route'. Colonel von Wechmar had joined 15 Panzer in the morning with 3 Reconnaissance Unit from Bir el Chleta and in the afternoon Rommel sent him to Bir Sheferzen, which he reached at 9 p.m.; but Cruewell knew nothing of this.

With Rommel and Cruewell thus acting at cross purposes only confusion could result. No matter how much he exerted the force of his personality, Rommel could not create a significant fighting potential from the battered and weary remnants of 21 Panzer. At the same time Neumann-Silkow, who alone had the strength to produce effective action, had developed serious doubts about the whole scheme and was less hopeful than Cruewell of being able to maintain the frontier operations from [Bardia](#). 'Intend to carry on against the [Sollum](#) front', he signalled to Corps at 8.10 p.m., 'but this will only be possible if contact is made with the [Tobruk](#) supply base.' His misgivings on this score were only slightly abated by the supply column which reached him in the night and it was evident to him that a return to the [Tobruk](#) front could not long be delayed. Both Rommel and Cruewell signalled for fighter cover next day against the torment from the air which had hampered them greatly; but in vain. Fighters from [Gazala](#) could not operate so far east. At El Adem Westphal was almost frantically trying to attract Rommel's attention to the very serious predicament in which he found himself. On the 25th he sent two aircraft to drop situation maps and other details, but both were shot down. After sending several wireless signals without acknowledgment he signalled to Cruewell at 10.57 p.m. in more moderate terms, having come to the curious opinion that the threat which he so greatly feared in the morning was now fading. By wireless interception he learned that two brigades and elements of one armoured brigade south-east of El Gubi were withdrawing and General Boettcher claimed to have repulsed an attack by two tank detachments of the New Zealand Division. The situation looked so favourable that Boettcher Group and Trieste Division were getting ready to stage a pursuit. Within a very short time 4 New Zealand Brigade, by seizing [Belhamed](#), must have disillusioned him.

If Rommel did in fact intend by the sudden move of his whole armoured force ¹ to the frontier area to shatter the nerve of the opposing commander and cause him to withdraw into Egypt he gained a partial success, but British misconceptions made his move seem less significant than its magnitude warranted. In any case, the crusader plan had been modified as much by circumstance and decision at lower levels as by the C-in-C, and Cunningham's few direct interventions had done little to affect the course of events. By the 25th an immediate full-scale retreat of Eighth Army was difficult, if not impossible, to bring about. Those who were fighting the battle outside [Tobruk](#) had the bit between their teeth. When Cunningham began to think of retreat and Auchinleck decided to dismiss him, the change was therefore less influential on the outcome of the campaign than might be supposed.

In his various statements on the subject Auchinleck gives three reasons for dismissing the Army Commander: defensive thinking due to heavy tank losses, undue concern about Rommel's dash to the frontier, and lack of confidence in his ability 'to carry out my intentions'. ² With his calm presence and firm insistence that crusader must continue, Auchinleck had achieved his purpose regarding the first and Cunningham obeyed him 'loyally', though there was in fact every justification for 'defensive thinking' by the evening of the 23rd. On the second score, both Auchinleck and Cunningham greatly under-estimated the scope and power of Rommel's move, which was on the face of it highly dangerous. On the morning of the 25th crusader was trembling on the brink; by evening the striking power of [Africa Corps](#) had declined by loss and other circumstance enough to allow Eighth Army a chance of survival and even, if Rommel failed to develop effective action quickly, a chance of victory (though the odds were still against this).

The third point was an afterthought. Auchinleck talked things over with Tedder, who was more than once critical of his Army colleagues, ³ and when he got back to [Cairo](#) in the afternoon of the 25th he consulted the Minister of State, Oliver Lyttelton. Then he wrote a letter removing Cunningham from his command. 'I am convinced that I am right', he cabled to Churchill the same day, 'though I realise the undesirability of such a step at present on general grounds.' [Lyttelton](#) and Churchill warmly supported him and the latter regarded this act as 'dominant and decisive', as

may be inferred from his opening remarks on crusader

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¹ DAK plus the Italian Mobile Corps, though [Trieste](#) did not join in as Rommel intended.

² Despatch, p. 339.

³ See, e.g., De Guingand, [Operation Victory](#), p. 124, and Wilmot, [The Struggle for Europe](#), p. 338.

⁴ [The Grand Alliance](#), p. 496.

grave and dangerous step to take and in the long run Eighth Army paid dearly for it, while in the short term it made little difference to the desert fighting.

The choice of a successor was an unfortunate one, as Auchinleck soon realised, and led in a very short time to a dangerous duality of command in which Auchinleck peered over the newcomer's shoulder and the new Army Commander, Ritchie, freshly promoted lieutenant-general,¹ kept glancing backwards for confirmation of his decisions. Auchinleck spent much of the next fortnight at Army Headquarters and it would have been better had he taken over command himself, as Churchill and Dill recommended on the 27th.²

Ritchie's background and experience were inadequate for the task. As De Guingand says, 'It was an incredible responsibility to throw on his shoulders'.³ The obvious choice, if not Auchinleck himself, was Godwin-Austen, whose determination to continue the offensive was beyond question. Norrie, being as he says himself 'armour-trained', was needed in his present capacity and [Freyberg](#) could well have taken over 13 Corps. But Auchinleck wanted to disturb things as little as possible and seems to have regarded the appointment as very temporary, to tide over the crisis. This passed, however, regardless of the change of command and Ritchie could not then be replaced until he lost the more promising [Gazala](#) battle next summer. Then

Auchinleck himself took command and kept it until he, too, was replaced. It was not Auchinleck's move but Rommel's 'brilliant brain-storm' which 'saved the Eighth Army from defeat' ⁴ on this occasion; in May and June of 1942 Rommel was in better form.
⁵

iv

The change was kept very quiet and it was several days before Godwin-Austen, Scobie, or [Freyberg](#) heard of it, so they carried on their battle as before. Nor did Rommel find out for some time that he had succeeded in disturbing his opponents to this extent, otherwise he might well have turned his attentions elsewhere in the frontier area and to better effect. In the meantime [Africa Corps](#) had given [7 Indian Brigade](#) at the [Omar](#) forts an unexpected though

¹ He had been Auchinleck's Deputy Chief of Staff and had never held an important command in the field.

² [The Grand Alliance](#), pp. 509–11.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁴ 'Strategicus', [The War Moves East](#), p. 75.

⁵ The news when it leaked out was astounding. 'It didn't sound so good', [Russell Hill](#) writes ([The Desert War](#), p. 84); 'you don't usually change generals in the midst of a battle.' [Alexander Clifford](#) 'did not believe it' ([Three Against Rommel](#), p. 157). 'We argued about it until we went to sleep, and next day we drove back to Army Battle Headquarters to see what we could find out. There were rumours, but no one knew anything definite.'

well-deserved taste of victory against the panzers and encouraged [5 New Zealand Brigade](#) to brace itself against attack. [Ariete Division](#) actually achieved more, because of erroneous reports of a 'battle' on 25 November at Taieb el-Esem, which attracted unwarranted attention in [30 Corps](#) and delayed support and supplies for the [New Zealand Division](#).

The area of 30 Corps by the morning of the 25th had been compressed south of the Trigh el-Abd except for Pienaar's 1 South African Brigade, which was astride it at El Esem. Norrie's current policy was to 'reorganise his troops behind an armoured car screen thrown out to the north to protect 62 FMC on which the immediate supply of the Corps depended, and to guard his lines of communication eastwards through the Wire.'¹ The reconnaissance units faced north with 4 South African Armoured Car Regiment on the right, the King's Dragoon Guards (less a squadron in [Tobruk](#)) in the centre, and [11 Hussars](#) (less a squadron with 22 Armoured Brigade) on the left.

Behind these, four Jock Columns formed up on a wide arc guarding the FMCs, each strong enough to rebuff curiosity but not to fight a pitched battle. They each consisted in the main of about two companies of infantry with field and anti-tank artillery, and were useful in the present circumstances in that they could cover a large area of ground against light enemy forces; but they needed some way of concentrating quickly under unified command against any major threat which might present itself, and no such way was provided. This was the persistent weakness of this Jock Column policy and much colourful publicity, sentimentally associated with the gallant 'Jock' Campbell after whom the columns were named, only served to hide it and present these columns as giant-killers, which they were not. Once the enemy concentrated, the Jock Columns could inflict scratches on him but no serious wounds. In this manner most of the remaining strength of the Support Group and much of 22 Guards Brigade was dissipated, the rest being committed in direct defence of the FMCs.

Outside this scheme there were only 1 South African Brigade and 4 Armoured Brigade, the latter with 37 tanks slowly picking its way southwards towards the FMCs. Brigadier Pienaar at Taieb el-Esem was very much alone and enemy flares which rose in many directions during the night of the 24th–25th emphasised this fact. He, too, was expected to break up his force into columns to harass any enemy venturing within nine miles of his laager, but he did not do so. South African patrols found enemy on three sides at dawn, with many tanks in evidence, and shellfire came down on the

¹ UK narrative.

position at 7 a.m. Pienaar took it that he was faced with a panzer division and sent exaggerated reports to General Brink that he was being attacked and asking for help. This caused much worry and a good deal of pointless argument between Brink and 30 Corps on his behalf, and in the end Brigadier Gatehouse was sent post-haste to Pienaar's aid.

All that had happened so far was that the artillery of Ariete and 7 Medium Regiment, RA, and 7 South African Field Regiment had exchanged fire, but little damage was done within the South African lines and there were no serious casualties. When the tanks of 4 Armoured Brigade interposed themselves between the Italians and South Africans and added the fire of 4 RHA to the current artillery duel, neither side cared seriously to challenge the other. An uneasy stalemate was thus maintained until dark. The Italian commander seems to have made just as much ado to his superiors about the fighting here as Pienaar did; but it was no part of his task to get heavily committed. Rommel badly wanted him in the frontier area and after dark that was where he headed.

Norrie was most anxious that Pienaar should stay where he was and several times questioned Brink on this point and was reassured. The messages between Brink and Pienaar, however, allowed some slight grounds for misunderstanding and in the evening Pienaar withdrew. Gatehouse opposed this move; but he had to follow in continuation of his task of protecting the South African brigade. Pienaar showed less reluctance on this occasion than on the night of the 22nd–23rd to undertake a move in the dark and reached 65 FMC in a most expeditious manner by 10.45 p.m. The 'Battle of Taieb el-Esem' was over and Brink was much embarrassed, expecting recriminations from Norrie, who had independent and more moderate reports of what had happened from 4 South African Armoured Car Regiment; but Norrie seemed unperturbed. His first thought was still to protect the FMCs against light enemy forces; but he had it in mind that 1 South African Brigade might be needed to help the New Zealanders and told Brink that Pienaar should be ready to move north at short notice for this purpose. Pienaar's withdrawal, however, had made it much harder for 30 Corps to help the New Zealand Division.

The presence of Ariete near Taieb el-Esem did serve a purpose, however, that was unintended and perhaps most important. Pienaar spoke of German tanks facing him and, when aerial reconnaissance reported this concentration, Eighth Army concluded, as the [United Kingdom](#) narrative states, that the 'bulk of the enemy armour, together with a proportion of artillery and lorry-borne infantry, remained confronting 1 SA Bde at Taieb el Essem'. This allowed Army to estimate the 'raiding force' which 'might have crossed the frontier in the [Sheferzen](#) area' as no more than 30 tanks and 500 infantry, and 4 Indian Division was therefore told to mop up the enemy along the L of C of 13 Corps as far west as [Bir Gibni](#), a task actually far beyond General Messervy's strength.

Messervy then had his 7 Brigade and [Divisional Headquarters](#) in the Omars, 11 Brigade on the coastal flat facing [Halfaya](#), and 5 Brigade still trying to assemble its scattered elements for a mobile role. In this endeavour 5 Indian Brigade was not having much success and it was simultaneously trying to put the Playground and North Point areas, suddenly of vital importance, into a state of defence.¹ Messervy was now under Army command, and behind his positions Brigadier Medley, BRA Eighth Army, was forming defences along the escarpment as far east as [Sofafi](#). At Libyan Omar 7 [Indian Brigade](#) now had to contend with the tanks of II Battalion, 5 Panzer Regiment, but these could do little in the maze of mines and ditches. The Indians overcame one of the three remaining platoons of the original Axis garrison in an early-morning attack on the 27th, but the final mopping up of Libyan Omar had to be left until later, when ammunition became more plentiful.

The most pressing danger to 13 Corps was that the enemy would seize the huge stocks of supplies of all kinds which were dispersed over an area far too large to guard effectively at 50 FMC, south of [Sheferzen](#), and for the early part of 25 November this danger seemed only too real. The Field Supply Depot, the Field Ammunition Depot, the POL dump, the Ordnance Field Park, the RE dump, the water point, the [NAAFI/EFI](#) stores,² the labour camp, the PW cage and the Field Post Office covered an area of more than sixty square kilometres centred on the administrative headquarters, 50 FMC, staffed by a handful of New Zealanders under Major Closey.³ But Closey was soon to find that the difficulties of control introduced by this wide dispersion were more than offset by the security gained. It needed a thorough and systematic investigation to disclose the value of this great prize; but the Germans

who came this way, with Rommel urging them to greater efforts elsewhere, had neither time nor encouragement for this.

There was nevertheless good reason for anxiety after the 'Matruh Stakes' field race through the previous evening and the panzers came

¹ The Column policy also reached out towards Messervy and he was expected to form mobile columns from his 5 Bde; but he could not do so.

² Navy, Army, Air Force Institute/Expeditionary Force Institute—a mouthful to describe the body which organised British services canteens and provided entertainment for the forces.

³ Lt-Col R. V. Closey, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born England, 14 Nov 1897; builder; OC 1 NZ Fd Maint Unit, Nov 1941–Apr 1942; OC 1 NZ PW Repat Unit, [Italy](#), 1945.

dangerously close. The FAD staff spent the night of the 24th–25th at Closey's headquarters; but he sent it back at 6 a.m. in the hope that the enemy was gone. At 8.15 a.m. it returned, having been fired at, and the enemy carried on 'along the escarpment' to the FSD and the Postal Tent, where they were distracted by a British convoy coming down from the north. A single German gun engaged this and most of the lorries were captured. Other enemy on foot collected any other vehicles they could find and sent them to the north. At the same time the Indian labour camp was shelled, one Indian killed and another wounded, and several others disappeared. Then a few guns of 2 South African Anti-Tank Regiment arrived on the scene and fired some shots, at which the German infantry quickly embussed and drove off, releasing a dozen men of the FMC staff they had captured. The Central India Horse then entered the area and about mid-morning the enemy drove off eastwards, later turning north. Closey found that 'quite a large amount' of the stores in the FSD had been taken and other stores damaged, but he lost only three vehicles of his own and gained two Italian lorries in working order, as well as several smaller vehicles. ¹ By 3.45 p.m. the whole FMC was working once more and convoys coming in from Railhead were unloaded until dark. The supplies for 13 Corps were for the moment safe and the main problem was to get them flowing forward from 50 FMC to the

troops who needed them.

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New Zealanders also had a small part in the action of the morning outside the Omars. Major Hood of 6 RMT Company, who had halted a little to the south-east with his lorries (and Sergeant Plumtree's detachment of Divisional Petrol Company), was asked to provide twelve lorries to help move 4/11 Sikh at about 1 a.m. on the 25th. He was also told to move with that battalion to Point 203, south-west of [Sidi Omar](#), and reached there at 7 a.m. after much struggling in the dark to assemble the lorries. Before the men had time to 'boil up' for breakfast, however, he was told to move on at once as the present area was 'a target' of the enemy. Thus he just escaped the first advance of 5 Panzer Regiment; but the new move was the parting of the ways. Hood was directed to [Conference Cairn](#) and then eastwards to 5 Indian Brigade at Playground. There he could get rid of his prisoners, he was told, and get in touch by telephone with the New Zealand Division. All but four of the twelve lorries had returned, shells were bursting in the neighbourhood, and Hood arranged to move at 5 m.p.h. for

¹ The other NZ FMC staff, 'B' NZ FMC under Maj F. W. Huggins, now realised that it could not open up 51 FMC as intended west of [Sidi Omar](#) and instead was sent this day to take over 46 FMC in the 30 Corps area.

a few miles and then wait for the four lorries which were still to come. He travelled seven miles and then halted, taking care to safeguard his prisoners, and arranged for a meal for them and his own men. This took time and by 10 a.m. only the second of several groups was lining up for its food when bullets swept into the group and a German column appeared among the lorries. Three drivers were killed and thirteen captured in the ensuing scramble and it was every man for himself. Hood's staff car attracted much attention and he had a lively time getting away. Only 39 lorries assembled in due course at [Conference Cairn](#), and Plumtree with only six of his 15 lorries ended up farther east at [Sofafi](#). For the time being 6 RMT Company had no hope of rejoining 6 Brigade, which was on that account not only short of supplies but tactically non-mobile since it was Hood's lorries which carried the infantry.

Supplying the New Zealand Division in its advanced position was becoming more and more difficult and this subject exercised many minds deeply. At 13 Corps Headquarters two possibilities were explored: air supply and replenishment from [Tobruk](#). The first came to nothing, though the Division was warned to be ready and given the necessary code signals. The second was premature and [Tobruk](#) could not in any case supply much of the most urgently needed item, 25-pounder ammunition, since its stocks of this were dwindling fast. Administration from Rear Headquarters near [Sidi Azeiz](#) was under the circumstances hopeless and it was therefore decided to move Rear Headquarters and Administration Group, including two NZASC companies, to Bir el-Haleizin, a point a few miles south of Bir Sciafsciuf. This seemed conveniently near to the Division and was not likely to be affected by [Freyberg's](#) efforts to link up with [Tobruk](#). The Ammunition Company was already near Haleizin, less one section with 5 Brigade, and was glad to receive on behalf of the Division petrol, ammunition and water brought in this morning by 65 General Transport Company, RASC, from 62 FMC, plus two German prisoners and a Fiat car, which betokened an adventurous journey. The move of Rear Division and Administration Group took place in the afternoon with little or no sign of enemy ¹ until after dark, when flares were seen. The huge group of vehicles spent the night a few miles short of its destination and had no trouble covering the remaining distance next morning.

Lieutenant Cottrell's detachment of the Supply Column had spent the night 24–25 November in no-man's land with German flares rising on all sides. Driving north soon after first light Cottrell came upon five German vehicles and captured them, taking fourteen prisoners. Then he was warned, like so many others before him,

¹ Though one detachment of nine lorries captured seven Germans on the way and handed them to 1 Army Tk Bde.

that German tanks were ahead and he turned back and made for 62 FMC, where he left his prisoners, filled up with rations, loaded one of the captured vehicles (formerly South African) with petrol, and was about to set out unescorted for the New Zealand Division when he was ordered to await the protection of an armoured brigade which was shortly going there. Cottrell, who had so far shown admirable determination, was irked by the delay and in the end set out independently.

To attend to the needs of 5 Brigade, another composite supply company was formed, again under Captain Roberts of the Supply Column, with C Section of the Ammunition Company, B and H Sections of the Supply Column, and a few lorries of 4 RMT Company for water-carrying. There were no lorries for POL, but none were likely to be needed for some time. Roberts duly assembled his vehicles and left for [Sidi Azeiz](#) at 4 p.m. On the way he caught sight of the vast bulk of [15 Panzer Division](#) heading in the same direction and reported accordingly to Brigade Headquarters when he reached there at 5.30. He could not do much until one of the FMCs, preferably the 50th, was reported open and the route was clear. Meanwhile his lorries added greatly to the congestion at [Sidi Azeiz](#), so that at 1 a.m. on the 26th he was told to go on to 22 Battalion at [Menastir](#), where the ample folds of the escarpment could shelter the composite company until it could be used.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 18 – TWO ATTACKS ON CAPUZZO

CHAPTER 18

Two Attacks on Capuzzo

i

FIFTH New Zealand Brigade had meanwhile spent two days in its blocking position outside [Bardia](#), starting with a lively attack in the morning of the 24th against the eastern outposts of 22 Battalion on the escarpment west of [Bardia](#). This seemed to be by about two companies of infantry covered by artillery and mortar fire, and the 22nd replied vigorously with all weapons including the Vickers of 4 MG Company, the 25-pounders of 28 Field Battery firing over open sights, and even the Bofors guns. This defensive fire was followed up by a determined counter-attack and the enemy withdrew to their lorries and drove back out of range. In half an hour it was all over, at a cost to the defence of five wounded and to the enemy of several dead and nine German prisoners, two of them officers. The enemy then shelled the unoccupied stretch of escarpment just to the east and when the Brigade Major, Straker, came up from [Sidi Azeiz](#) to see what it was all about he found the men of the 22nd quietly getting ready for breakfast.

The time passed with little incident after this and Hargest was mainly troubled by the shortage of 25-pounder ammunition and also of long-range Mark VIIIIZ ammunition for the Vickers guns, which caused splendid targets below [Sollum Barracks](#) to go begging. An LO from the CRA of 4 Indian Division came forward and promised to see what he could do about this, though he held out little hope of substantial supplies of ammunition. He did, however, bring news of the heavy fighting at the Omars on the 23rd, and from this Hargest inferred that it would be some time before he could rejoin [Freyberg](#). Another LO from [8 Royal Tanks](#) came in later with a request that B Squadron be sent to Bir el Chleta as it was badly needed there. From this it seemed that all was not well with [Freyberg](#) and Hargest visited Corps Headquarters at Bir el-Hariga to discuss this. There he learned that 6 Brigade had had heavy fighting. 'The decisive battle is still being fought west of us', he wrote in a letter to Colonel Leckie at [Capuzzo](#), 'and as every tank will contribute to our success I have released those attached and they are proceeding "hot foot" to the assistance of the Division.' He held out hope that 5 Brigade might be relieved in twenty-four hours' time and instructed Leckie as follows:

Be vigilant and aggressive without becoming involved in the fighting.... I want the 28th Battalion to get a patrol into [Sollum](#), if possible, and feel along the road towards [Halfaya](#) and the [23rd Battalion](#) to push a patrol along the escarpment. In none of these patrols do I wish to incur casualties or be engaged in battle, but to harass the enemy and if possible pick up prisoners.

The Div. Cav. are still operating between the 23rd and 22nd. Get every MT [i.e. vehicle] in as serviceable a condition as possible so that if we are called upon to assist our Division we can move with speed.

I am sure everyone will be with me in a desire to render all the help we can.

Leckie was already conducting his operations in the spirit intended, sending out six patrols, one consisting of the whole of D Company, which clashed with 'D'Avanca' strongpoint. A patrol towards [Bardia](#) reported that the enemy 'is extremely vigilant and appears to fire at anything that moves'. A Maori patrol at night failed to take prisoners and had two wounded in a heavy bombardment.

It was not until 10.30 a.m. on the 25th that news came in of German mobile forces with perhaps thirty tanks in the frontier area and the battalions of 5 Brigade began to take further precautions against tank attack. Then news came in that the Indians had knocked out seven of the thirty tanks. The hesitant movement of about 200 vehicles from the top of [Halfaya Pass](#) towards [Bardia](#) in mid-afternoon was shelled by 27 Field Battery and no threat developed; but there was no breath of suspicion that this was in fact part of [21 Panzer Division](#). In the evening 22 Battalion was ordered to send B Company to [Sidi Azeiz](#) to help defend Brigade Headquarters.

From Corps Headquarters Hargest also wrote another of his cheerful letters to [Freyberg](#), which reached the GOC next afternoon. ¹ 'All goes well with me but I expect to be attacked at [CAPUZZO](#) and [MUSAID](#) by the tanks that have penetrated behind the frontier wire south of [OMAR](#) and are now pushing on towards [HALFAYA](#)—I believe they will turn north to [BARDIA](#) and attack the 23/28 [Battalions]', he wrote. Patrols had ventured within a mile and a half of [Halfaya](#) the night before and found 'no enemy—in disgust they discharged their rifles with no results—they came home in broad daylight.' The 22nd patrolled 36 miles round the northern side of its position, 'result 6 prisoners'. 'For heaven's sake send for us the moment we can be

freed,' he added. 'The men are fresh and the strength good—morale high and we have kept our mobility at a high pitch. I can do no more than wait—in the meantime we are harassing the enemy.'

¹ See p. 282.

Later reports, however, put the enemy armour at very much greater strength and fleeing vehicles confirmed this. Towards dusk Brigade Headquarters was startled to learn that the threat was not, as had been imagined, from enemy who had crossed the frontier and gone on to [Halfaya](#), but from a very much larger body which was at that moment heading for [Sidi Azeiz](#) and no great distance away. The [RAF](#) sent up a special reconnaissance sortie from the airfield at once and reported that some 2000 vehicles, including tanks, were making for Brigade Headquarters; but in the gathering gloom the pilot over-estimated the distance and stated that the enemy was still 20 miles away. No immediate danger was therefore apprehended, though Hargest put in train various precautionary measures, warning Corps Headquarters and his units, bringing the [RAF](#) detachments at the airfield inside his defences, and posting listening posts with telephones half a mile in both directions along the Trigh Capuzzo and at the southern side of the airfield. For some time he seriously thought of taking his whole headquarters northwards to join 22 Battalion, where the escarpment offered better protection against tanks, and he warned Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew accordingly. Men at Brigade Headquarters were told to sleep alongside their weapon pits with firearms and ammunition handy and were put at ten minutes' notice to move. At 7.05 p.m. sub-units were sent the following signal:

Have a good number of guns. We will fight the position. NO one will leave his post until the signal to move is given. NO whistle signals will be given without the order of Bde Comd. ¹

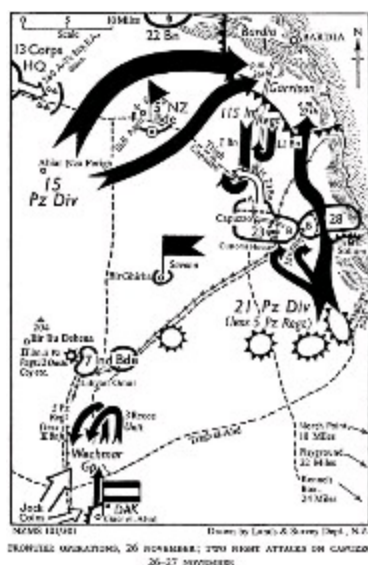
The night that followed was tense throughout the brigade area, with enemy flares rising and falling continually on all sides and many happenings which made nerves jumpy. A convoy of German vehicles carrying British prisoners blundered into the defences in the darkness before dawn on the 26th and was fiercely engaged for a few minutes by B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, and the two attached anti-tank

guns. A dozen Germans including a medical officer were captured, with all their vehicles, and some fifty RASC men released from captivity, one of whom had lost a foot in the brief action. The medical officer willingly and skilfully went to work at the dressing station at [Sidi Azeiz](#), in the best traditions of his profession.

Soon after first light a very large enemy movement was in progress from west and south of [Sidi Azeiz](#) towards [Bardia](#), most of the long columns of vehicles passing between Brigade Headquarters and 22 Battalion. The Brigade Major, Straker, says, 'German transport,

¹ Part of the B Echelon of Div Cav and the B Echelon of 34 A-Tk Bty (which was under [Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll's](#) command) moved northwards during the night to shelter within the 22 Bn lines.

tanks and guns simply flowed through the gap about 3 miles distant from Bde HQ', and a counting post recorded 300 vehicles passing in ten minutes and from this and other observations calculated the total for the day at 3000. 'Some vehicles drove extremely close', he adds, 'and were picked off at point blank range.'



FRONTIER OPERATIONS, 26 NOVEMBER; TWO NIGHT ATTACKS ON CAPUZZO, 26-27 NOVEMBER

At Bir el-Hariga, a few miles to the west, 13 Corps Headquarters was also in the firing line and two troops of 260 Anti-Tank Battery, RA, fought a sharp action at dawn. They claimed three tanks knocked out, one gun, and several other vehicles, at

a cost of half a dozen casualties, and suffered the loss of two 2-pounder portées. Three vehicles and nine Germans were captured. For the rest of the day the enemy was plainly in view but there was no more fighting. There was every reason, however, to seek a safer place for Corps Headquarters and at 6 p.m., unbeknown to Hargest, it moved off westwards along the Trigh Capuzzo, ending up for the night at Bir el Chleta.

The new situation was somewhat bewildering to Captain [Johnson](#)¹ of B Company, 22 Battalion, who had reported at [Sidi Azeiz](#) in the night 25th–26th and was told to take all but one platoon, with the four 25-pounders of E Troop, to a position south of the airstrip to defend this against an enemy estimated to have 15 tanks and 50 other vehicles. The company duly dug in before dawn and could scarcely believe its eyes when the grey light of morning showed up masses of German lorries, several of which drove right up and were captured, mostly without a shot fired. The enemy drove at first from the west full pelt towards Brigade Headquarters, and when E Troop opened fire at a range of about a mile the leaders veered northwards. Any stragglers or movements which seemed to threaten Headquarters were discouraged by the field guns and MMGs, which were kept busy as they moved with Johnson's company to conform to the enemy's movements in the early afternoon. A gun sergeant in E Troop describes it thus:

We moved south parallel to the line of the enemy column and had a great time driving up to within 2,000 yds. range, then dropping our trails and banging a few rounds into them, then hurriedly shifting out again, only to do the same thing further along.²

Three such manoeuvres, however, sufficed to use up most of E Troop's ammunition, and when several Pzkw IIIs nosed out from the column Johnson's force retreated in haste. H Troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery also engaged the enemy with its three 18-pounders, firing about twenty rounds per gun in the morning. At one stage the gunners waited as a half-tracked vehicle approached towing an anti-tank gun, intending to fire at point-blank range. Before they could do so, however, a Bofors of D Troop, 42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, opened fire with alternate high-explosive and armourpiercing rounds and the tractor burst into flames, helped by the second round from one of the 18-pounders, which scored a direct

¹ Lt-Col S. H. Johnson, ED; Wellington; born Whangarei, 5 Oct 1910; school teacher; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; Regular soldier; Director, AEWS, 1953–60.

² A. W. Cook.

hit at about 700 yards. Two Germans were killed outright and the remaining three very badly hurt. Four 2-pounder portées tried several times to get within range but each time were driven back by fire from heavier German guns, perhaps 75-millimetre guns of Pzkw IVs. A troop of three light tanks of Divisional Cavalry under Second-Lieutenant Murchison, ¹ seeing no German tanks in the column, attacked it boldly but came under fire which knocked out one tank. The fabulous size of the enemy force and the paucity of resource with which to attack it, particularly ammunition, left Brigade Headquarters Group little to do after mid-afternoon but stand and stare. The enemy 'passed on either side of us, pouring by like a flood, leaving my little garrison a lonely rock in the midst of a swollen river', Hargest says. ²

Hargest had at his disposal three powerful wireless sets, the Rear Link, the Air Support Control tentacle, and an RAF set, and therefore did not expect any trouble in communicating with 13 Corps, which was only ten miles or so away. When all three tried and failed, however, he began to worry. An LO then drove through one of the gaps in the German column and came back to say there was no sign of Corps at Bir el-Hariga. About 3 p.m. operators reported that Corps was again on the 'air' and a signal was sent outlining the situation and asking for instructions. This was acknowledged but no reply came. Divisional Cavalry then reported a 'huge laager just outside the Eastern entrance to BARDIA' as an excellent target for bombing, and another signal recommending this at first drew the reply, 'Sorry, unable to give bomber support'. This was followed at 5.30 p.m. by another which promised twelve Maryland bombers at 6 p.m. 'That was the last message received from 13 Corps', Straker says. 'The bombers did not arrive.' Two reconnaissance aircraft came down on the airstrip at dusk, but their crews could give no useful information. Then reports began to come in about a heavy attack on 23 Battalion from the direction of Bardia.

At Menastir, 28 Field Battery (less E Troop) was better supplied with ammunition than the guns at Sidi Azeiz and fired off a good deal of it, though with

disappointing results, as the enemy columns were well dispersed. A far more influential action, though the men concerned had no idea of this, was fought by the four 2-pounders of F Troop, 32 Battery, which opened fire at about 1000 yards' range on two German tanks which appeared from the west along the [Via Balbia](#). The anti-tank guns scored several hits in a total of 36 rounds fired, and after some hesitation the tanks turned tail and disappeared. ³

¹ [Capt I. L. Murchison](#), MC; [Timaru](#); born [Timaru](#), 29 Oct 1911; farmer; wounded 4 Jul 1942.

² Farewell Campo 12, p. 12.

³ See Llewellyn, pp. 144–5.

To the gunners this was no more than a passing incident; but it had wide repercussions. The tanks were in fact exploring for the ubiquitous Captain Briel the possibility of sending supplies through to [Africa Corps](#) by the direct route from [Gambut](#), and they reported back that this route was closed. This caused the various German supply authorities to continue using the present long detour round the New Zealand Division. The difficulties and delays in provisioning the two panzer divisions therefore continued as before and had much to do with their lack of success in the frontier area.

The Maoris in their commanding positions at Upper Sollum gained a false sense of power, encouraged by a bombardment by 27 Field Battery of Lower Sollum and Pier Point in which guns of 11 Indian Brigade seemed to have joined. The Maoris entered heartily into the spirit of the thing and bombed buildings around the pier with their 3-inch mortars, while the MMG section in C Company area also fired long bursts at selected points below. Those who could look out over almost every inch of enemy territory below marvelled at the admirable precision of this fire and their admiration was scarcely diminished by the replies from the [Halfaya](#) guns. The enemy nevertheless had more guns and ammunition, and at 4.20 p.m. proved it by laying such a heavy concentration of shellfire on the OP of 28 Maori Battalion that it had to be abandoned. From there the shelling moved to the area of A Company on the

escarpment south-west of the barracks.

That this might be something other than a response to the provocation offered by the New Zealand fire did not occur to the Maoris at Upper Sollum, though ten minutes earlier A Company had reported an enemy convoy coming from the direction of [Halfaya Pass](#). The shelling carried on until dark and it was not until then that reports of fighting at [Musaid](#) gave it more meaningful undertones.

At Musaid 23 and 28 Battalions under Colonel Leckie overlapped, and in the morning the troops there saw the enemy waste many shells on unoccupied ground to the south. Later E Troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery had to move several times because of shellfire which was at times fairly heavy. In the afternoon the huge enemy columns appeared in the west making for [Bardia](#) and lorries which were to pick up 25-pounder ammunition at [Sidi Azeiz](#) could not get through. Later still enemy appeared in almost all directions round 23 Battalion at [Capuzzo](#), and Leckie sent a platoon of A Company and a section of Vickers guns along the road to [Bardia](#) to 'cover forward positions', ¹ the other section of MMGs staying with the rest of A Company north of the fort. Several tempting

¹ 23 Bn diary.

targets for the field guns appeared to the north-west but did not come near enough to justify opening fire in view of the scarcity of ammunition. Leckie knew next to nothing about what [Africa Corps](#) was doing and the increasing evidence of enemy movement around him suggested that the garrisons of the other frontier strongpoints were trying to get through to [Bardia](#), a most promising development, implying that were nearing the end of their resources.

Soon after 4 p.m. this interpretation failed to fit the facts. There were far too many enemy in evidence and too much transport. The heavy shelling on the OP of the Maoris to the east looked ominous and became personal when part of it was switched to the neighbourhood of [Fort Capuzzo](#). An attack on the Maoris seemed imminent; then [Capuzzo](#) itself seemed to be the objective. Since enemy lay all round the position it was hard to know where to expect attack and, in the words of Second-Lieutenant [Jeavons](#), ¹

The situation had got too ludicrous to worry about and everybody was quite cheerfully determined to do his best though our ultimate fate seemed to be certain. ²

At 4.45 p.m. the [Bardia](#) guns joined those of [Halfaya](#) in bombarding the battalion area and men peered through the dust and smoke for signs of the inevitable attack. When this came from two directions—from the north and the south-east—it seemed like a concerted effort to overwhelm 23 Battalion, and it was a blessing that the effort from the north was less determined than the strength of the enemy there seemed to warrant.

ii

The appearance of a unified operation against [Capuzzo](#) on 26 November, however, was deceptive, and the enemy acted in fact with little or no co-ordination, so that his crushing superiority of strength was not effectively brought to bear on Leckie's positions. The day had started with Rommel as determined as ever to destroy those forces of Eighth Army which he still imagined to be on both sides of the frontier line between the Omars and [Sollum](#), and which perhaps he now realised might include troops posted inside the defences of Omar Nuovo and possibly Libyan Omar. The urgent need of both panzer divisions to get ammunition, petrol and other supplies before they could exert their full strength, however, made no impression, and Rommel was unaware that both Neumann-Silkow and von Ravenstein looked to the [Bardia](#) garrison as the only possible source of essential supplies.

¹ [Capt A. J. H. Jeavons](#); Dunedin; born [Auckland](#), 26 Apr 1909; barrister and solicitor; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

² Quoted by Ross, *23 Battalion*, p. 109.

A further complication was that when he called at Cruewell's small headquarters Rommel learned for the first time of Westphal's pleas for help on the [Tobruk](#) front. But he refused to let this deter him from his current purpose, and in this he clashed again with Cruewell. The [Africa Corps](#) diary sets out Rommel's orders as follows:

The most urgent job is to clear the [Sollum](#) front quickly. All available troops must be

committed to push the enemy into the minefield and force him to surrender. For this purpose all MT, including supply troops, must be directed to kick up all the dust they can to deceive the enemy as to our real strength and hasten his surrender.

Then it registers Cruewell's strong dissent.

Cruewell was half-convinced that the supposed 'enemy' was mythical, and in the afternoon he began to realise that the New Zealand Division was not north of the frontier line but facing Boettcher Group outside [Tobruk](#). In the meantime Rommel had gone, saying that he was bound for [Bardia](#) by way of 21 Panzer (though he did not in fact meet von Ravenstein until next morning). In his absence Cruewell could not abandon the frontier operations and went ahead with them as best he could, trying at the same time to get together the force destined for Jarabub. Part of Knabe Group had reached Corps Battle Headquarters for this latter purpose by 12.10 p.m.; but 15 Panzer had so far sent none of its quota for the Jarabub force and Cruewell well knew that Neumann-Silkow, a strong-willed and at times 'difficult' subordinate, was unlikely to send it. To add to his worries, Cruewell found his small group at Gasr el Abid the subject of attention from British guns to the south and then under attack from what looked like ten tanks, which overran a troop of light German field guns guarding the southern flank and was held off from Battle Headquarters only by the arrival of an anti-tank gun from Knabe Group, which covered a hurried withdrawal of Headquarters northwards to join Knabe. This started at 4.30 p.m. and by 6 p.m. Headquarters was out of danger.

The British mobile troops in the area nevertheless remained bothersome and engaged most of the attention of the vestigial remains of 5 Panzer Regiment—now ten tanks in working order—and of 3 Reconnaissance Unit this day, to the detriment of the task again given by Rommel to Major Mildebrath of attacking the [Omar](#) forts from the south. Mildebrath knew that he could not achieve anything useful against such strong positions, and after Rommel departed he seems to have made no serious effort to carry out these orders. Von Wechmar, less well-acquainted than Mildebrath with the situation at the Omars, advanced northwards with Mildebrath's tanks under his command, but was also soon convinced of the futility of trying to make headway against the field and anti-tank artillery of the defences. Cruewell tried to get von Ravenstein to break the British hold on this vital anchor of the frontier line; but 21 Panzer, with only two small battle groups of infantry and MMGs

with supporting artillery, was facing north on a wide front with its right flank on [Halfaya](#) and there was no hope of concentrating it quickly enough against the Omars for Cruewell's purpose. In truth Cruewell was floundering as much as Rommel in his efforts to produce effective action in the frontier area; but unlike Rommel, he did not have his heart in it. He was far more interested in getting back to the [Tobruk](#) front.

Neumann-Silkow, who alone had the strength to achieve any real success, was left to his own resources on the 26th. Messages he sent Cruewell's headquarters gave the impression that he was making progress against heavy opposition, but he did no real fighting at all until a late hour, and even then only on a small scale and without conviction. His attitude at this stage is indeed something of a puzzle. Kriebel, who was his GSO I, gives a startling account of the way Neumann-Silkow's mind was working. He points out that it was by no means certain that [Bardia](#) could provide even the bare essentials for maintaining the frontier operations and says that his divisional commander was considering something utterly different from what Cruewell or Rommel intended. He wanted to break away to the south-west, get in touch with Ariete, and order supplies from [Gambut](#) to be sent to him at Gabr Saleh, after which he would advance jointly with Ariete to relieve the situation on the [Tobruk](#) front. ¹ He was getting desperate calls for help from Westphal and was alone in fully recognising the urgency of Westphal's need. He made no such move; nor did he do what Cruewell ordered at 7.35 a.m., namely 'Attack Capuzzo immediately'. ² This was out of the question, according to the divisional diary:

The continued supply difficulties and the lack of ammunition, water and food compelled the division to move to [Bardia](#) first, replenish supplies there, and then assemble for a new action.

The order from Corps seems to have decided Neumann-Silkow against going to Gabr Saleh and he chose instead to 'push on to [Bardia](#)' ³ before tackling either [Sidi Azeiz](#) or [Capuzzo](#). By 11.30 a.m. the leading elements of the division were inside the fortress and began to replenish supplies, and a little later 15 Panzer signalled Corps as follows:

Enemy SW of [Bardia](#) driven back and contact established.

Will continue our attack after filling up with petrol.

Ariete is 13 km NW of [Sidi Omar](#), moving NE.

¹ A signal to 21 Pz Div at 7 a.m. says that 15 Pz Div was advancing to link with Ariete to 'smash the enemy at Gabr Saleh'.

² 15 Pz Div diary; D AK diary includes [Sidi Azeiz](#) in the order.

³ Kriebel.

The garrison of [Bardia](#) was not equipped to handle supply arrangements for a whole panzer division and this work made painfully slow progress, so that neither the immediate tasks of attacking [Capuzzo](#) and [Sidi Azeiz](#) nor the next phase which Corps envisaged—to draw the division off to attack [Sidi Omar](#)—could be undertaken before dark and another vital day at the frontier was thus wasted. Ariete, however, was closing on [Bir Ghirba](#) 'to block off the [Sollum](#) front from the west', ¹ and with this backing Cruewell decided to ignore for the time being the British at the Omars and concentrate on the other end of the frontier line. He therefore told Neumann-Silkow to clear up the situation south and south-east of [Bardia](#) and join hands with 21 Panzer.

This seemed to 15 Panzer a simple task. 'The only thing known of the enemy', the divisional diary says, 'was that he was occupying [Capuzzo](#) and had a small force in Upper Sollum', and only the depleted I Battalion of 115 Infantry Regiment was committed to drive from [Bardia](#) to [Capuzzo](#) with artillery support and then carry on to take Upper Sollum. Even this small operation took longer to prepare than expected and it was 5 p.m. before I Battalion started its advance, covered by fire from 33 Artillery Regiment.

By this plan 21 Panzer was supposed to wait south-west of [Halfaya](#) until 115 Regiment broke through and joined hands; but Ravenstein either misunderstood or had other ideas and ordered both of his battle groups to break through to [Bardia](#), with the elements of 104 Infantry Regiment on the right between [Musaid](#) and Upper Sollum and those of 8 MG Battalion on the left at [Capuzzo](#). These moves took place not long before dusk, covered by the divisional artillery and the [Halfaya](#) guns, and 23

Battalion was thus presented with a threat from both panzer divisions, which it naturally took to be two prongs of a single attack to take [Fort Capuzzo](#), though in fact each acted quite independently of the other. Rommel himself reached [Bardia](#) in the evening, apparently without seeing anything of Ravenstein or his immediate subordinates and knowing nothing of these moves.

The attack by 15 Panzer was the lighter and came against A Company of the 23rd under Captain [Connolly](#),² and in particular against 8 Platoon under Lieutenant Brittenden.³ A section of 2 MG Platoon under Corporal [Mack](#)⁴ was in direct support of 8 Platoon and opened fire on German lorries which drove forward from the direction of [Bardia](#), forcing the leading infantry to debus, at which

¹ D AK diary.

² [Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly](#), m.i.d.; [Ashburton](#); born NZ 13 Aug 1910; petrol serviceman; CO 23 Bn Apr-May 1943, Dec 1943, Dec 1943–May 1944; twice wounded.

³ Maj J. A. M. Brittenden; [Wellington](#); born Tinwald, 28 Mar 1914; artist; wounded 5 Jul 1942.

⁴ [WO II R. J. G. Mack](#), MM; [Papakura](#); born NZ 3 Apr 1917; hospital orderly.

the company mortars joined in, scoring a direct hit on a lorry with the first shot. Heavy shell and mortar fire came back at 8 Platoon, however, and the guns of 27 Battery remained silent or else were occupied with the enemy approaching from the south, so that as Connolly says, 'we could not stand there long against their mortar & artillery fire'. A Company had been in the habit of retiring at dusk to a night position closer to the Fort and Connolly now decided to carry out this manoeuvre. One Vickers gun and crew had to stay behind, however, to give covering fire, and the two 3-inch mortars were too hot to move and were also left.

But 8 Platoon had more on its hands than Connolly thought. It faced what looked like a full battalion in extended order and halted it for a noisy hour and half

until the smoke and dust folded into the night and the desert came alive with flares and flashes. It was this furious fire which made the mortars too hot to handle, and after dark 8 Platoon attracted troublesome crossfire from MGs which had worked round to about 20 yards behind Brittenden's forward posts. Then Brittenden received Connolly's order to withdraw and sent a runner to pass it on. Allowing time for the sections to fall back and seeing no sign of them in the blackness, Brittenden took his small headquarters back towards [Capuzzo](#), expecting his men to be already there. Fighting which had meanwhile broken out to the south-east, however, impeded inquiries and it was a matter of hours before he realised that his sections had not returned.

The runner had not got through and in Brittenden's absence Sergeant [Cherry](#)¹ assumed command of 8 Platoon, only to be badly wounded shortly afterwards, at which Corporal [Minson](#)² took command. With one section each side of the road and a third in reserve, Minson had no thought of falling back until the enemy began a massive advance in the dark. He realised, as he says, that he was 'obviously outnumbered' and sent a man back to Connolly for permission to withdraw. But he had no intention of letting the enemy push him back. Pending further instructions he decided on quick action to remedy increasing pressure on the left. Drawing the whole platoon up parallel to the road and facing west, he did a 'parade-ground job' of fixing bayonets and leading 8 Platoon with the utmost gallantry into the teeth of the opposition.

The resistance of his small band had already made a deep impression on the enemy, to the point that Colonel Menny of 15 Infantry Brigade had ordered the other battalion of 115 Regiment to attack on the left of I Battalion and east of the road. I Battalion,

¹ [Sgt H. R. Cherry; Christchurch](#); born [Kaiapoi](#), 11 Apr 1909; NZR employee; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

² [Sgt R. D. Minson](#); Motukaraka; born [Christchurch](#), 24 Sep 1918; dairy worker; twice wounded.

in following up Connolly's withdrawal, thought it had penetrated 500 metres into

the defences of [Capuzzo](#) and Minson's onslaught struck it on the left flank with remarkable effect. Minson had already lost six men out of thirty, and the twenty-four remaining charged ferociously with bayonet and hand grenade, cutting a swathe clean through the German battalion, as the report of 115 Regiment confirms:

the enemy had apparently brought up reinforcements ... and was counter-attacking to try to regain his positions where 1 Company had broken in. Under cover of darkness the enemy came right up to our positions, and bitter fighting with bayonets and hand grenades developed. In one spot the enemy even broke through our positions. The two light infantry guns of 5 Coy (2/Lt Lange) forced the counter-attack to halt only 50 meters from their positions. Those of the enemy who were not killed or wounded surrendered.

Minson carried on until hit in the thigh and forced to hand over to Lance-Corporal O'Connell, ¹ who continued in the same brave fashion until, in a sea of enemy, 8 Platoon broke up and was over whelmed. Crawling back to his lines in the dark, Minson was the last to return: twenty-three men were missing, later reported to be prisoners of war. On their own they had held up a German regiment long enough for Rommel to intervene and call off the whole operation.

The fortunes of 8 Platoon, however, were forgotten and its achievement unnoticed in a night of violent activity, most of which concerned not the ill-starred attack by 115 Regiment but the efforts of 21 Panzer to break through to [Bardia](#). B Company of 28 Maori Battalion under Captain [Royal](#) ² was disposed in and near the eastern half of [Fort Musaid](#)—a fort in name only—with a gap of a mile and a half to the rest of the battalion at Upper Sollum. B Company of 23 Battalion under Captain [Romans](#) ³ had 10 Platoon in the western part of [Musaid](#) and 11 and 12 Platoons around the Customs House a mile east of [Fort Capuzzo](#). At 4.30 p.m. a carrier patrol reported enemy vehicles moving towards [Musaid](#) and then heavy shellfire started, some of it from 21 Panzer and the [Halfaya](#) garrison and some, unconnected with this, from 33 Artillery Regiment in support of 115 Regiment.

The enemy column to the south divided into three, and one came straight at [Musaid](#) while another followed the track along the top of the escarpment and thus came upon the left flank of Royal's

¹ L-Cpl M. G. O'Connell; Oxford; born Rangiora, 2 Jun 1918; labourer; wounded and p.w. 26 Nov 1941.

² Maj R. Royal, MC and bar; Wellington; born Levin, 23 Aug 1897; civil servant; Maori Pioneer Bn in 1914–18 War; 28 (Maori) Bn 1940–41; wounded 14 Dec 1941; CO 2 Maori Bn (in NZ) May–Jun 1943.

³ Lt-Col R. E. Romans, DSO, m.i.d.; born Arrowtown, 10 Sep 1909; business manager; CO 23 Bn Jul 1942–Apr 1943, Aug–Dec 1943; twice wounded; died of wounds 19 Dec 1943.

company. The Maoris held their fire admirably, as usual, and the foremost vehicle had passed the outposts before Royal gave the order to engage it. The vehicle was soon dealt with and the Maoris forced the enemy facing them to dismount and form up on a wide front. Under cover of artillery and mortars the advance continued; but for a whole hour Royal held it up well short of his lines by accurate Bren and 2-inch mortar fire.

Leading the direct approach to [Musaid](#) were what looked like half-tracked lorries towing guns and these were engaged by all four 2-pounder portées, which were quickly brought on the scene. The guns were 'stopped' and also two light tanks which drove boldly along the road towards [Capuzzo](#). When a larger group of vehicles drove towards [Musaid](#) the anti-tank gunners waited for them to get closer; but the field guns with their deeper voices then spoke up and the enemy changed direction, moving parallel to the portées, which engaged them on the flank at 1000 yards' range and scored more hits while the light was strong enough to take aim. At dusk the portées moved back inside the defences of the Customs House.

Captain Romans made his way to [Fort Musaid](#) as soon as the firing broke out and when he arrived he sent back to the Customs House for 11 Platoon, which came forward to reinforce 10 Platoon. The main weight of the attack at [Musaid](#), however, was to the east, where Royal's company of Maoris was stationed, and under cover of this fighting the enemy slipped much transport through between B Company and the rest of 28 Battalion. Another thrust, however, came in against the Customs House soon after 11 Platoon left, so that Romans's 12 Platoon had to fight it off aided only

by the 2-pounders of E Troop, which could not do much in the gathering darkness. Romans rushed back and brought his 3-inch mortars into action against the guns which were blazing away at the Customs House. These were of large calibre, probably 150-millimetre infantry howitzers, and the mortars scored direct hits on them, a success which owed much to the courage of an acting lance-corporal, [Russell](#),¹ who got up very close to these guns and helped to direct fire on them.

The fighting for perhaps half an hour was very confused; but by the time it was properly dark the enemy seemed to have had enough. Vehicles were driving through the gap to the east, beyond the reach of Royal's company, four or five abreast and this movement continued for an hour, during which the defences were re-established and strengthened. Then the tail of the large enemy column, apparently unaware of what had gone before, rushed straight at Royal's defences, overrunning the outlying posts—the shallowest of

¹ [Cpl A. Russell](#), MM; Bluff; born Ruapuke Island, 3 Jun 1905; oysterman; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

trenches—and provoking furious fire from the Maoris, so that for a few minutes the scene was tangled with flashes and streams of tracers. In this mêlée one light tank and six other vehicles were knocked out. In the end, the enemy again withdrew, reorganised, and then drove through the gap, leaving the Maoris in undisputed possession of the ground they had vigorously defended.

Just before 9 p.m. the 2-pounders had a final clash with a half-tracked vehicle which could barely be discerned in the dark and which they knocked out. Romans's mortars engaged enemy MGs which fired at E Troop's gun flashes and hit a small anti-tank gun and caused its crew to abandon it.

The morning revealed clearly the vigour of the defence, particularly in front of the Maoris, where seventy-six German dead were counted and seven prisoners, most of them wounded, were taken. Two Maoris had been killed and four wounded and two were missing. There was also an impressive array of equipment left behind by the enemy, including two half-tracked 20-millimetre gun carriers, eight cars and trucks, and one ambulance car, as well as the anti-tank gun which fired the last

rounds of the action. To the north of [Capuzzo](#), Brittenden went at first light to find out what he could of his missing men. He found only the dead, however, and no sign of the Germans, though a little later a German lorry was captured, its driver having been told that [Capuzzo](#) was in German hands.

iii

This was in fact what 115 Infantry Regiment had thought after Brittenden's platoon was overwhelmed and opposition seemed to have ceased, the Germans not realising that they were still some distance short of the main [Capuzzo](#) defences. II Battalion east of the [Bardia](#) road had met no resistance and had got within 800 yards of [Capuzzo](#), and the regimental commander was confident that the Fort was at his mercy and that the British had withdrawn. He was therefore very much upset when a message came in which ordered him to 'Break off contact immediately and return to your starting point'. After checking with Menny of 15 Brigade, this was confirmed as correct and he had to obey it. Thus 23 Battalion was saved from very much heavier fighting than anything yet experienced here; and the saviour was none other than General Rommel himself, who had reached [Bardia](#) and insisted on breaking off the action in favour of his original and larger conception of attacking all points on the frontier line simultaneously. Another chance encounter saved the Maoris at Upper Sollum from attack by 15 Motor Cycle Battalion, which Menny had committed after 115 Regiment began fighting. Its task was the second part of that given to 115 Regiment: to capture Upper Sollum and gain contact with 21 Panzer. On the way the battalion met 8 MG Battalion entering the southern defences of [Bardia](#) and thus made the desired contact with 21 Panzer, thereby discharging its main task and leaving the Maoris around [Sollum Barracks](#) in uncontested possession. Meanwhile 115 Regiment reluctantly withdrew, reaching its starting line by 12.30 a.m. and leaving a small rearguard in position for an hour or so.

Similar misunderstandings clouded Ravenstein's view of these events and the divisional report appended to the [Africa Corps](#) diary says that [Capuzzo](#) was captured by the division on its way through to [Bardia](#), but that Indians ¹ counter-attacked with grenades and anti-tank guns and caused 'some casualties'. The Customs House was evidently mistaken for [Fort Capuzzo](#), though it was not in fact captured. But an even greater surprise was in store when 21 Panzer came upon 15 Panzer. Ravenstein had

no idea Neumann-Silkow was anywhere near [Bardia](#), while the latter expected to link up with 21 Panzer some miles south of [Capuzzo](#). Rommel was in [Bardia](#) and von Ravenstein eventually found him there in the early hours of the 27th and reported in, confident that this was what Rommel wanted. But Rommel was furious. The messages from Westphal had made it essential to bring the current operations to an end and now Rommel was faced with the possibility that they would fail completely.

Whatever happened, [Africa Corps](#) had to return to the [Tobruk](#) front this day, 27 November, and Rommel and Cruewell had therefore laid out a programme for bringing the frontier fighting to a successful conclusion in a matter of hours. Cruewell's plan was that Wechmar Group and Ariete in combination should recapture the Omars, while 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions then lunged forward in a fresh effort to sandwich between them the British troops still believed to be facing the frontier line from both sides. But this was in ignorance of Ravenstein's entry into [Bardia](#), which Cruewell did not learn about until some hours later; and it was in any case a hopelessly ambitious plan.

Rommel's habit of arriving in person and handing out orders on the spot to whoever appeared to be in charge often led to confusion; but usually the headquarters of Panzer Group and [Africa Corps](#) were able to reconcile the contradictions. The trouble in this case was that the headquarters scarcely existed and could exercise little or no control. At [Bardia](#) Rommel got Neumann-Silkow and Ravenstein together and gave out fresh orders, still hoping that he would somehow be able to return to [Tobruk](#) crowned with success. Neumann-Silkow was to attack at dawn from a line between [Bardia](#)

¹ Ravenstein expected to find the Indian Div closely investing the frontier strongpoints and mistook the Maoris for them.

and [Sidi Azeiz](#) on a broad front against the frontier between [Capuzzo](#) and Libyan Omar, which Wechmar Group (with no mention of Ariete) would in the meantime capture. Then the whole force would swing right and return towards [Tobruk](#), where the situation was grave.

Kriebel says Neumann-Silkow objected that such an operation would take up

valuable time, would have little chance of success against widely dispersed British forces, and would entail heavy loss, as well as delaying the return to [Tobruk](#) until the next day. Neumann-Silkow wanted instead to seize what he thought was a large British dump at [Sidi Azeiz](#) and then head westwards, but Rommel would not hear of it, stubbornly insisting on his own plan, which gave Neumann-Silkow a harder task than ever and with less support. Rommel accepted Ravenstein's view that 21 Panzer was no longer strong enough to achieve any worth-while purpose in the frontier area and agreed that it should make for [Tobruk](#) at once.

Even Rommel's renowned personality failed to inspire confidence in these orders and Neumann-Silkow had no intention of embarking on another excursion along the frontier line, reversing the procedure of 25 November. Instead he ordered 15 Panzer to edge out from its present laagers towards [Sidi Azeiz](#) and thus sealed the doom of Hargest's headquarters.

Westphal's confidence in the evening of the 25th that Boettcher had overcome the threat which faced him had long since been shattered and the Italian forces besieging [Tobruk](#) were showing signs of falling apart. He signalled in this sense at 7.20 a.m. on the 26th and another appeal for help reached [Africa Corps](#) at 9.25 a.m. Expecting his earlier appeals to have borne fruit, he looked for a panzer division to appear on the scene at any moment. When RECAM (the reconnaissance group of the Italian Mobile Corps) made an inquisitive but hesitant move towards 6 New Zealand Brigade from the south in mid-morning, observers at [El Adem](#) seem to have jumped to the conclusion that the panzers had already returned. By 10.20 a.m. Westphal, with remarkable resilience of mind, was again able to bring his thoughts to the possibilities of staging a pursiuit. By 3 p.m. these hopes had faded and he signalled urgently and rudely: 'Where are our tanks? Get going as fast as you can.'

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 19 – THE LOSS OF 5 BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS

CHAPTER 19

The Loss of 5 Brigade Headquarters

i

THE signals from [El Adem](#) and Neumann-Silkow's scepticism about the utility of the frontier operations combined to produce a grave threat to 5 Brigade Headquarters at [Sidi Azeiz](#), which the Germans had thus far been content to by-pass but which now offered as a prize at least some consolation for failures elsewhere. Hargest had spent some hours awaiting orders from 13 Corps, but none came. He was therefore left with his existing instructions, which were to contain [Halfaya](#) from the west, sever land communications between [Bardia](#) and [Halfaya](#), cut off [Bardia](#) from the west, and protect the reconnaissance airfield at [Sidi Azeiz](#). These were framed, however, before [Africa Corps](#) reached the neighbourhood and made no sense in the present circumstances. Only two aircraft remained on the landing ground, with orders to reconnoitre locally for as long as possible and then fly off; so the airfield was unimportant, especially after 13 Corps Headquarters moved westwards. Hargest had asked Corps on the 25th to relieve him of this commitment, but Corps refused.

How much was left to Hargest's discretion cannot now be decided. Few documents of the period survive and the main sources are the recollections of those who spent years together as prisoners of war. In his book Hargest is gloomy; ¹ but his letters to [Freyberg](#) were confident and even aggressive, and on the 26th he allowed the only field guns and infantry he had to skirmish along the flanks of the enemy columns.

About 1 a.m. on the 27th a detachment of Divisional Ammunition Company reached [Sidi Azeiz](#), under the misapprehension ² that 51 FMC had opened up there, and it was sent on to 50 FMC, which was now known to be functioning again. With it went lightly wounded men and Major Russell, now a 'roving LO', who was to explain to General Messervy the predicament Hargest was in. The brigade LAD and other NZASC vehicles had already been sent to 22 Battalion and the Headquarters area was thus freed of some of the unwieldy mass of transport which clogged it and

¹ Op. cit., p. 17.

hampered the defence. But the headquarters of 5 Field Regiment, 27 MG Battalion, and various sub-units which remained at [Sidi Azeiz](#) kept the proportion of non-fighting vehicles unduly high. Hargest goes on to say that his orders were 'hold' and they allowed of no compromise'; but he was nevertheless free to move his headquarters to a safer place so long as he left the airfield defended. An obvious place was the 22 Battalion area at [Menastir](#), where the steep escarpment gave some protection against tanks, and Hargest thought of moving all non-fighting vehicles there when the Staff Captain approached him at a late hour. Captain [Mason](#) ¹ wanted good warning of any likely move and Hargest told him that Corps had ordered him to hold on, but that if 'nothing came through next morning we were to move at midday'. The Brigade Major, Straker, says that Hargest meant to 'fulfil his current orders to the utmost', but if the enemy remained in the frontier area 'he intended to concentrate the Bde in either the [CAPUZZO](#) or the [MENASTIR](#) area'.

Brigade Headquarters and attached troops ² spent a restless night, with flares much in evidence all round. The night was bitterly cold and the signalman who operated the main wireless set (with Straker sleeping alongside him) found reception bad. Hargest slept in a tent a few yards away and rose early, sending a message at 6.30 a.m. to all three battalions saying, 'How are you? Everything all quiet here'. The day had just dawned. Divisional Cavalry had long since been searching the neighbourhood for signs of enemy movement and had found none. Enemy flares always seemed closer than they actually were on moonless nights and daylight unexpectedly revealed no enemy in sight, though the slightly curving slope of the ground as it fell away to the north-east made the horizon in that direction close. A clerk who was on duty at Brigade Headquarters says, 'We were all a bit gloomy'; ³ but MG fire to the north, which he was not surprised to hear at dawn as he boiled the billy for tea, soon ended and a minute or two later a German wireless truck drove in, captured by Divisional Cavalry.

Two platoons of B Company, 22 Battalion, had dug in on the western side of the perimeter in defence of E Troop, 5 Field Regiment, and the third platoon was in the south-east, covering one of the anti-tank 18-pounders. The Defence Platoon also

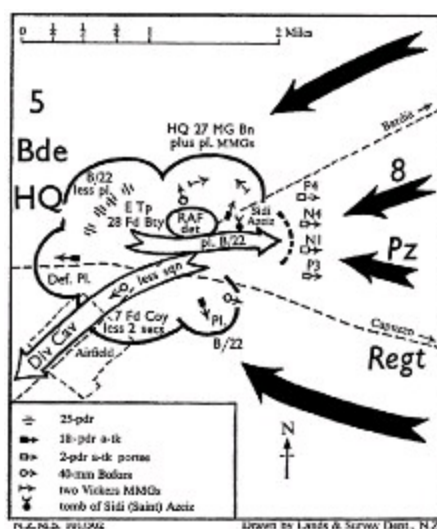
faced west along the Trigh Capuzzo with another 18-pounder. The third

¹ Capt W. W. Mason, MC; London; born Wellington, 21 Mar 1910; schoolmaster; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

² HQ Div Cav and two squadrons, HQ 5 Fd Regt and one troop (4 guns), HQ 32 A-Tk Bty and troop (3 18-pdrs), two half-troops of 34 A-Tk Bty (4 2-pdrs), HQ 42 Lt AA Bty and one section (3 Bofors), HQ 7 Fd Coy and one section, B Coy 22 Bn, HQ 27 MG Bn and one platoon, the Bde Defence Pl, HQ 309 Gen Tpt Coy, RASC, and an ADS of 5 Fd Amb.

³ F. G. Nixon.

18-pounder was in the north-east corner of the position, with some and perhaps all the four Vickers guns to its left and the personnel of the headquarters of 27 MG Battalion as infantry. On Bofors was in the north, one in the south-east and the third in the south-west. The mixed troop of four 2-pounders, still under the command of Divisional Cavalry, remained en portée within the perimeter, able to move as required but dangerously conspicuous in this flat desert.



THE CAPTURE OF 5 BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS, 27 NOVEMBER

These dispositions gave much more strength in the west than in the east and the mass of lorries in the area obscured observation so that the 25-pounders could

not engage tanks by direct fire except to the west. Only one 18-pounder, one Bofors, and the four vulnerable portée 2-pounders covered the eastern perimeter, now the likeliest to be attacked. The group could therefore use no more than a fraction of its resources, small as these were, to meet attack from the east and no infantry faced that direction.

It appeared to [Africa Corps](#) that this small force meant 'to prevent us from moving west'; ¹ but the immediate purpose of 15 Panzer had not been to move west but to gain elbow room for a wide movement to envelop the British forces supposed to be facing the frontier line. There are several suggestions in the German documents, now hard to understand, that the [Sidi Azeiz](#) force had moved into position during the night. The Germans evidently did not find it easy to reconcile the pin-pricking activities of mobile elements of Hargest's group on the 26th with the resistance they met this day. At 6 a.m. 8 Panzer Regiment reported 'enemy positions and MT concentrations' at [Sidi Azeiz](#), but the diary of 15 Panzer refers again later to the 'defended supply dump' there.

The situation from the point of view of 15 Panzer was complicated by a tug-o'-war between Rommel and the Panzer Group staff at [El Adem](#), the former not yet reconciled to leaving the frontier area with a record of failure and the latter anxious for help at the earliest possible moment. Neumann-Silkow received orders from both. Rommel wanted him to swing round on a wide front, with his right flank facing Libyan Omar, and Panzer Group told him to 'move immediately to relieve the [Tobruk](#) front' as there was 'a serious threat to [El Adem](#)', and at 6 a.m. added that the situation was 'very dangerous' and he was to 'Make all possible haste' and report when he moved off. Rommel's orders naturally prevailed; but the C-in-C had in the meantime decided that [Sidi Azeiz](#) must be seized to make room for the manoeuvre he wished Neumann-Silkow to make against the frontier line, and at 7.30 a.m. 15 Panzer reported in this sense to Corps.

The fate of 5 Brigade Headquarters was thus decided almost by chance, since Neumann-Silkow was more likely to by-pass it if he acted on Westphal's instructions. But no formal orders were issued and the assault which actually took place was the result of co-operation on the spot by unit commanders and their subordinates, used to working together on the battlefield and able to improvise tactics as the situation demanded. When 15 Panzer began to move two hours before dawn it meant to gain

a starting line along the

¹ DAK diary.

track from [Bardia](#) to [Sidi Azeiz](#) in readiness for Rommel's frontier operation, but much confusion arose from a concurrent move by 21 Panzer towards the [Via Balbia](#) and a bad traffic tangle imposed several hours' delay.

Shaking out from this mix-up, the head of 15 Panzer came close to [Sidi Azeiz](#) and was engaged by field guns. ¹ This prompted Lieutenant-Colonel Cramer of 8 Panzer Regiment to send his light tank troops forward. By degrees the whole of the regiment became involved and, as a matter of course, 33 Artillery Regiment too. A heavy concentration of guns of calibres up to 150-millimetre ranged on Hargest's sketchy defences and then brought down a crushing weight of fire from distances of no more than 2–3 miles. 'Air bursts' kept the heads of the defenders down, and with good observation and short-range fire the New Zealand field guns were soon silenced, so that Abteilung ² II of 33 Regiment was not needed. But the tanks also fired briskly, and at the end of it all Neumann-Silkow was able to report with evident pleasure that he had used up all his tank-gun ammunition, and as he could not replenish this he could 'hardly attack any further south'. Thus he excused himself from any further frontier operations. Despite earnest efforts to continue it, Rommel's 'evil dream' in this way came to an end. Rommel had one last gesture to make, however, before turning his gaze once more towards [Tobruk](#).

There was no sign of enemy when the men of 5 Brigade Headquarters began to prepare breakfast, and fears of attack engendered by the previous day's experiences and the flares at night were allayed. The IO, Captain [Sandford](#), ³ was talking to the Brigadier and the Staff Captain was examining the captured wireless truck which had just been brought in, when Lieutenant-Colonel [Nicoll](#) ⁴ of Divisional Cavalry drove up in his light tank and reported that forty German tanks were approaching from [Bardia](#). Sandford says this was at nine minutes past seven; he rushed to his tent and began writing a signal to all unit and sub-unit commanders: 'Forty tanks approaching from [Bardia](#)'. But he had jotted down only the time and half the text when the first shell arrived, quickly followed by others. Hargest sized up the situation in a flash and told

Nicoll to get clear, as his lightly armoured tanks could do little against German tanks. The Mark VIB tanks and Bren carriers and some

¹ The German accounts agree that the British opened fire first; but E Troop did not and the fire must have come from elsewhere.

² Slightly stronger than a British battery.

³ [Capt H. S. Sandford](#); born NZ 29 Jun 1914; accountant; wounded May 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll](#), ED, m.i.d.; [Ashburton](#); born [Ashburton](#), 2 Feb 1900; farmer; CO Div Cav Jul 1941–Oct 1942.

of the lorries of Divisional Cavalry raced through the laager in a matter of moments, attracting some fire but suffering no damage, and they rallied a few miles to the south. Hargest told Mason to sound the siren, the agreed warning of attack, and then picked up a rifle and walked to his slit trench, accompanied by his batman.

Captain Johnson of B Company, 22 Battalion, reacted quickly, sending one of his two platoons to the eastern perimeter to be ready to repel infantry'; ¹ and the two officers in command of the anti-tank portées, who had of their own accord elected to stay and fight when Divisional Cavalry departed, ² drove through to the east as soon as they saw this was the threatened sector. With no organised defence there they found no pattern into which they could fit the 2-pounders, and on the spur of the moment took them up to a slight rise some 200 yards beyond the perimeter and formed them up in line. The two remaining Tac/R Hurricanes took off just in time and, after circling for a few moments, flew away. As the men of E Troop, 5 Field Regiment, were having breakfast they were told to take post; but they could see little at first because the brigade lorries blocked their view to the east, and when they opened fire it was, as Sergeant Cook ³ says, 'at 2,000 yards in the general direction east', over the tops of the lorries.

With some forty tanks approaching and no vestige of cover for their high portées, the anti-tank gunners saw no point in holding their fire and P4 opened up at

about 1200 yards, quickly followed by the other three. The German tanks began to reply when still more than 1000 yards away, concentrating their machine guns and larger armament on the four portées and scoring direct hits on all of them. The gunners also scored hits, but the ranges were long and the tanks so numerous that the results could only be guessed. Knowing full well the odds were hopeless, the gunners nevertheless carried out their drill in parade-ground order and the No. 1 of P4, Bombardier [Niven](#),⁴ gave his orders quietly and calmly, allowing three rounds for each tank engaged, until the gun was hit and its traversing and elevating gears wrecked. By this time N1 had caught fire, and one of its crew was killed and two others wounded; on P3 three gunners were wounded, one of them mortally,⁵ and the gears were also smashed; and on N4 two were killed and the sight bracket damaged. Niven was still unhurt and he walked ('strolled' according to one witness) over to the other guns, helped the wounded to board N4, and told the driver to take them back to the ADS.

¹ As Sandford overheard.

² They were still under Nicoll's command.

³ 2 Lt A. W. Cook; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 12 Oct 1918; salesman; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

⁴ [Bdr M. G. Niven](#); England; born [Singapore](#), 24 Oct 1913; farmer; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

⁵ His leg was carried off by a solid anti-tank shot, the modern equivalent of a cannon ball.

Then he unloaded the wounded (the driver by this time among them) and the dead, and, taking the driver's place, drove the portée back into action from a position roughly level with Hargest's trench. Hargest watched in wonder and admiration as Niven, single-handed, engaged the tanks, now much closer, with deliberate fire. He saw him, 'load, aim, fire—load, aim, fire, time after time', attracting an arc of German tank guns towards N4 as though it were magnetised.

The portée was hit on the side and set on fire, then again behind the gun, and a third round 'struck the shield and shot the muzzle straight upwards where it remained pointing to the sky', Hargest writes. 'Niven slid from the truck and disappeared unhurt.'¹ But Niven's efforts did not end here; he made his way over to the nearest 18-pounder, which was still in action, then to the Bofors, doing what he could at each until it ceased fire, and was with E Troop, 5 Field Regiment, in its final stand.²

The nearest 18-pounder of H Troop, 32 Battery, opened fire at 1000 yards³ and drew heavy return fire at once, which hit the gun tractor and killed three men. But the gun carried on, firing its last shot at about 150 yards and causing a tank to slew round under the impact, to the delight of the layer. The delight, however, was momentary and the cost great; for two of the crew lay dead and two more wounded and the gun was promptly wrecked by a torrent of fire. The crews of the other two 18-pounders and one of the three Bofors heard but could not see and fretted at their impotence. But the second Bofors fired 15 rounds of a mixture of HE shell and AP shot, halting one of the tanks. This gun was then disabled and the third carried on the action, firing AP at first and shooting all it had, 30 rounds, then switching to HE and getting away 40 rounds of this before the inevitable end.

The platoon of B Company of the 22nd had to make its way through the acrid smoke of blazing lorries and bursting shells, with bullets fluffing up the sand around the men's feet, but they did not falter. Hargest saw them as they 'moved steadily, not hurrying, indifferent to the ruin blazing around them' until they drew nearly level with the line of portées and dropped down to await the German infantry. They saw none, but fired into the mass of transport ahead, and when they saw tanks coming they got their 'sticky bombs' ready. Behind them, according to Straker, 'cooks, clerks, batmen and, worthy of mention, the [RAF Det\[achment\]](#) directed a concentrated fire in the general direction of the enemy', shooting through the

¹ Op. cit. p. 20.

² Niven, through volunteering for medical duties when captive in [Bardia](#), was taken to [Italy](#) and later to [Germany](#). He made several attempts to escape, one of them ending unluckily with his recapture in the course of

a routine street check.

³ i.e., when the tanks were within about 700 yards of the anti-tank portées and all but N4 were out of action.

smoke when this blotted out their view. Among them was Hargest himself and a private heard him call out, 'Can you see anything to shoot at, because I can't.' A little later Hargest was bruised on the hip by a shell splinter.

The 25-pounders of E Troop were soon hidden behind the smoke and for this reason lasted longer than the other guns, though in the end they received the undivided attention of the German artillery. Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser ¹ was at the gun position and with him Major Grigg, ² second-in-command of the regiment, and they went from gun to gun, watching all the time for breaks in the swirling clouds of smoke through which to observe their fire and glimpsing from time to time 'tanks on the skyline silhouetted against the rising sun'. ³ The guns spoke up valiantly, though to doubtful effect, until the German artillery gained by flash-spotting the bearings it needed and brought down a thunderous and devastating gun fire which hit two guns and several lorries around them. Grigg had meanwhile gone for more ammunition, crossing open ground in face of terrible fire and bringing back a 3-ton lorry with a full load. On the way back smoke was so thick he had to lead on foot past burning trucks and round obstacles for a quarter of a mile. He brought the lorry up to Sergeant Cook's gun and began to unload it. Captain Ombler ⁴ of E Troop lay dead, after setting a gallant example, and with him six of his men. Cook was hit in the arm while moving the gun trail to engage tanks which could now be seen, and many other men were wounded.

The ammunition lorry was hit as soon as it halted and burst into flames and the ammunition began to explode. No more than two or three rounds remained at the gun and the explosions alongside were so violent that Grigg ordered the crew to take cover. But he took no heed of the fire himself and went over to the one gun which could still fire and found this, too, nearing the end of its ammunition. Scouting round, he soon found a few more rounds and brought them up. In the whole position only this one gun now flashed its defiance and, with crew members hit by the fire aimed at this solitary centre of opposition, Grigg took over as gun loader. Dust and

smoke made the gun sights useless and Grigg slipped out to the side where he could see—and be seen. There he stood calmly directing the layer, undaunted by the blazing fury of fire which each round attracted as the tanks picked up the gun flash through the smoke, until he fell gravely wounded and E Troop's last gun ceased fire.

¹ Lt-Col [K. W. Fraser](#), OBE, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Edinburgh, 1 Nov 1905; asst advertising manager; CO 5 Fd Regt 1940–41; wounded and p.w. 27 Nov 1941.

² Maj [A. N. Grigg](#), MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 16 Nov 1896; MP 1938–41; died of wounds 29 Nov 1941.

³ [C. H. B. Stone](#).

⁴ Capt [E. P. Ombler](#); born [Timaru](#), 13 Dec 1917; warehouseman; killed in action 27 Nov 1941.

The tanks were already deep among the lorries, the infantry powerless to stop them, though they flung three 'sticky bombs' at them before they surrendered. Private [Nixon](#),¹ in a large trench, his rifle butt splintered by bullets, had a typical experience. 'Every time there was a lull', he says, 'I thought we had driven them off'. Another man put up his head and yelled, 'The tanks are coming in' and added, 'The bastards will kill the lot of us'. Then he jumped out and zig-zagged to the rear. Nixon waited, unbelieving but not knowing what to expect. Then another man told him to put up his hands and said, 'We've surrendered'. Nixon was shocked: 'It had never occurred to me that we might surrender.' He felt relief and at the same time humiliation.

Hargest had been much concerned about what seemed to be a nest of German machine guns to one flank and ran round the partly destroyed Intelligence lorry to see Straker and find out if there was any way of counter-attacking them. Straker answered without words by pointing to tanks closing in less than a hundred yards away, 'stretched across the camp with the extremities thrust forward like the horns of a crescent'. The tanks were not firing but Straker could see grenades being tossed

out from some of them on the left, bursting to his left rear. An [RAF](#) officer named McIntyre fired a full drum of Lewis-gun ammunition at the nearest tank but it 'did not deign to reply'. It cost Hargest 'a great effort', Straker says, to signal submission to this tank.

This turned out to be Colonel Cramer's and Hargest was called to join Cramer, 'a bespectacled German officer', in the turret and found he spoke English. Cramer complimented him on the fight his men had put up and agreed that they should be allowed to collect their coats, blankets and food before being marched off (though in fact few were given this privilege). Then Rommel himself appeared on the scene, neatly dressed and shaven, and called for Hargest, also congratulating him, though annoyed that he did not salute. Hargest was allowed under guard to visit the nearby ADS, where he sat for a few moments beside the now-unconscious body of his friend and parliamentary colleague, Grigg. As he walked away into captivity fact and feeling interacted painfully in his mind. 'So great was my misery', he writes, 'that I envied Arthur his quiet sleep in the sun.'

The best estimate of casualties in this action is that 44 men were killed and 49 wounded, most of them gunners, while about 46 officers and 650 other ranks were captured and marched off to [Bardia](#), a long trudge under light escort. The German armour soon moved off westwards, leaving the prisoners in the hands of about

¹ [Cpl F. G. Nixon; Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 15 Jul 1903; maltster.

a company of motor-cyclists and infantry. Most of the other ranks were duly released some weeks later, but some of them and all of the officers were taken to [Italy](#). Divisional Cavalry had watched until about 9.30 a.m. and then unfortunately withdrew to [Sidi Omar](#), where Nicoll reported to General Messervy.

The dressing station at [Sidi Azeiz](#) with some eighty patients was left alone and its three medical officers and ther few assistants were too busy to worry about their curious situation. The worst of the German wounded were also left with them and, though no guards stayed behind, German detachments (often including tanks) moved past on their way west at intervals throughout the afternoon. The staff and

patients therefore felt that if they were not prisoners they were at least under enemy surveillance, and so they remained for several days before being officially 'recaptured'.

ii

At Menastir 22 Battalion plainly saw the smoke at [Sidi Azeiz](#) and heard the thunder of guns for about an hour and then there was silence. As Captain [McLernon](#)¹ of D Company says, 'we realised Bde. had been taken.' A brief wireless signal had announced that Brigade Headquarters was under heavy attack. No more was heard and at 1 p.m. a DR was sent to investigate but did not return. Ten minutes later a large column of vehicles drove down on to the [Via Balbia](#) east of [Menastir](#), advanced a short distance, and then dispersed on the flat below the escarpment and guns opened fire on the 22nd. To this 28 Battery (less E Troop) and 4 MG Company replied with such vigour that the enemy soon turned northwards and then passed westwards over broken country, out of range. Half an hour later another enemy force appeared to the north-east and opened fire on the 'left forward coy on top of the escarpment', according to the unit diary, which regarded the battalion as facing [Bardia](#). This fire was heavier and more persistent and was backed up by a series of infantry attacks which were beaten back only with difficulty. Artillery and mortar fire were heavy and accurate and scored so many hits and near misses on the four 25-pounders that all were put out of action, two of them permanently, and the crews suffered heavy loss, four men on one gun alone being killed. For 28 Battery this was a hard day indeed.

But the enemy fared no better. All four 2-pounders and two of the three Bofors fired from the rim of the escarpment at ranges up to 3000 yards and with the MMGs they exploded the ammunition beside a German mortar, destroyed a staff car and several other vehicles, and gave the enemy much trouble. The best efforts of the

¹ [Capt S. M. McLernon](#); [Gisborne](#); born [Gisborne](#), 14 Jul 1913; civil servant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

defence, however, could not stop the enemy infantry from closing in from the east and south-east, above the escarpment, and the [Bardia](#) guns gave them

excellent support. By 5 p.m. McLernon began to get uneasy; but to the great surprise of the whole group the enemy quietly withdrew, followed to the limit of their long range by the MMGs, and the engagement ended. ¹

Casualties in 22 Battalion were remarkably light considering the weight and accuracy of the enemy fire; but [Lieutenant Donald's](#) ² platoon of C Company lost several men and [Donald](#) himself had his eardrums shattered by a near miss, though he stayed in action. With time now to think of other things, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew tried several times without success to get in touch with other units by wireless or other means, and he began to realise that history was repeating itself: his battalion was again isolated as it had been at [Maleme in Crete](#).

Andrew might have felt rather better had he known that this day he had held off much of [21 Panzer Division](#) and in the end forced General von Ravenstein to draw back and swing south through [Sidi Azeiz](#) to get past 22 Battalion. In so doing he delayed the return of 21 Panzer to the [Tobruk](#) front by a day. In a report to [Africa Corps](#) 21 Panzer stated that it had come upon a battalion which was 'well dug in' and by the evening its 'fire superiority had not been neutralised.'

iii

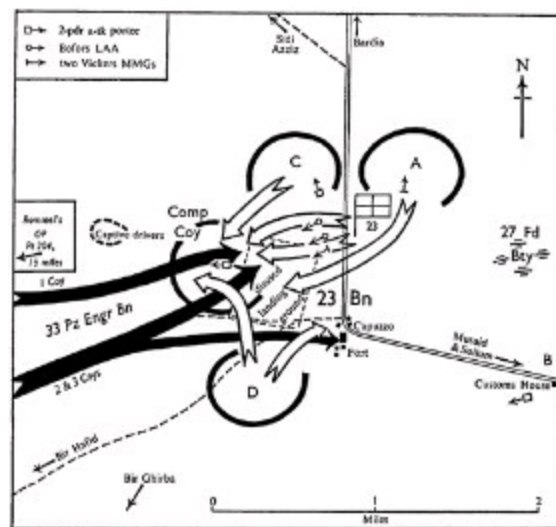
At Capuzzo and Upper Sollum, 23 and 28 Battalions started the day in good spirits, seeing for themselves the losses and damage they had caused the enemy in the night's fighting and not learning until much later that their brigade headquarters had been lost. A Company of 23 Battalion turned back fourteen lorries approaching from [Bardia](#) at 8.15 a.m. and at ten o'clock carriers and a repaired Valentine of B Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), drove off more enemy in the same area and covered a detachment of machine-gunners who retrieved the Vickers gun which had been abandoned in the night, the two mortars, and much ammunition.

¹ F Tp, 32 Bty, had previously engaged two tanks advancing from the west and knocked one out. It proved to be a captured Matilda, and over fifty direct hits were scored on it at ranges between 300 and 900 yards before a lucky shot passed through an aperture in the turret (where the grenade thrower had been knocked off) and wounded the crew. Another shot had jammed the turret and a third had removed a plate guarding the

suspension, permitting a fourth to penetrate and damage the engine. The toughness of the armour was amply proved. The crew was captured and the other tank disappeared westwards.

Again this affected the enemy's supply services. These tanks led a convoy of 33 lorries intended for [Africa Corps](#); but, though there were three more tanks in the escort, they all turned back to [Gambut](#).

² [Lt-Col H. V. Donald](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); [Masterton](#); born [Masterton](#), 20 Mar 1917; company director; CO 22 Bn May–Nov 1944, Mar–Aug 1945; four times wounded.



ATTACK ON CAPUZZO, AFTERNOON OF 27 NOVEMBER

Then at midday 105- and 150-millimetre guns shelled D Company and the fort itself and two hours later enemy were seen advancing from the south-west, estimated at 2.30 p.m. as about a battalion with light tanks, anti-tank guns, and armoured troop-carriers—a formidable force which 27 Field Battery engaged at once. The 25-pounders were extremely accurate and forced the enemy to dismount soon after they opened fire. They scored several direct hits and so did G Troop, 32 Anti-Tank Battery, the foremost portée of which, under Sergeant [Stewart](#),¹ knocked out several vehicles, firing even after it was set on fire. Scarcely had Stewart's crew put out this fire, however, when another hit started a second blaze and three men, including Stewart, were wounded. The Bren-gunner jumped aboard to act as loader while Stewart carried on firing until exploding ammunition in the racks below forced

him to abandon the gun, taking the firing mechanism with him. From the ground all gunners who could handle a rifle continued to engage the enemy until surrounded and forced to surrender, though shortly afterwards they all escaped and rejoined their troop.

¹ Lt A. B. Stewart, DCM; Auckland; born NZ 17 Apr 1906; planter; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

22

C Company of the 23rd had been drawn into this action as the enemy veered northwards to avoid the well-aimed fire of D Company and, as the enemy worked in that direction, he came within range of a Bofors of E Troop, 42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, about 300 yards west of Battalion Headquarters. This set fire to a troop-carrier which was driving through the transport area of 23 and 28 Battalions, but it could not stop infiltration by the enemy infantry through the mass of lorries which here formed a weak part of the battalion perimeter. The drivers of 309 General Transport Company, RASC, and men of 28 Maori Battalion B Echelon formed a makeshift 'company', but this was only lightly armed and some sixty men were captured by three light tanks and an armoured troop-carrier and marched off a short distance. They remained within view of 23 Battalion, however, and several efforts were made to rescue them.

The Bofors continued to fire and earned so much of the enemy's attention that the troop subaltern decided to ease the pressure by bringing up another gun. This drove forward until the driver was killed and then went into action and knocked out an enemy tank, silenced a machine gun, and drove back several clusters of infantry with its automatic fire. When four of the crew of this second gun had been killed and two wounded it was ordered to withdraw, its task achieved.

By about 4 p.m. the enemy had exploited the weakness in the transport area and counter-measures were restricted by the presence in the background of the sixty captive drivers and B Echelon men. A dashing sortie by six carriers of the 23rd got right up to this group about 1000 yards west of the transport area; but the captives were closely threatened by the MGs of their guards and could not get away, two of

the carriers were disabled, and the remaining four had to withdraw. A counter-attack offered the only possibility of releasing these men, the bayonet being a more discriminating weapon than the machine gun or mortar. This responsibility fell on the adjutant, Captain [Orbell](#),¹ who received a rousing response when he called for volunteers. With twenty men he set out to the north-west, meaning to swing round and fall upon the transport lines from the north. The IO, Second-Lieutenant Jeavons, took another half-dozen men due west and D Company committed first a section and then a full platoon from the south, a section of MMGs to the north gave lively support, and two platoons of C Company enfiladed the enemy and brought down heavy covering fire for the counter-attack.

¹ Maj R. M. S. Orbell; [Greymouth](#); born [Oamaru](#), 17 Feb 1915; shipping clerk; wounded 17 Aug 1942.

All these detachments had to advance in face of all kinds of fire and some of them were extremely embarrassed by their inability to give effective reply because of the prisoners in the background. The thrusts nevertheless made ground in the most determined fashion. Jeavons, for example, led his small band through a clamorous bedlam of sound 'with shells, mortar bombs, bullets and shrapnel whizzing, whining, screaming and crackling everywhere' until halted by a German anti-tank gun on the far side of a stretch of flat, open ground well covered by fire. 'We could not stop them by firing from cover', he says, 'and if they came on we were sunk'. So he gathered his handful of men and rose to charge the gun. After fifty yards he was hit and his shoulder broken, but he carried on. Then two men were killed and shortly afterwards Jeavons was hit again, and after another fifty yards or so he was hit a third time, his helmet carried some yards away, and he was brought to his knees. He got up and, after a few more yards, was hit heavily in the chest, and though he rose again he could do no more than stagger a few paces and fall flat on his face.¹

Major Pugh² of Headquarters Company led another detachment which included Captain Berry of 309 General Transport Company, RASC, and this also advanced bravely in face of heavy fire. Berry was particularly inspiring and, according to the 23 Battalion diary, he 'pushed forward armed only with a revolver which he fired until

empty.' Then he went 20 yards unarmed—or, as others say, with a swagger cane—then caught up the rifle of a fallen man and continued to advance until killed.' A wounded private lying near where Berry was killed says, 'I still do not know whether he was over-game or foolish as he had no fire arms.'³ Pugh also was wounded, and two more officers with him.

The captive drivers must have been moved back at this stage and, once they were far enough away, mortars and machine guns could be used freely and the situation at once eased. The mortars got away more than 300 bombs and had much to do with this lessening of enemy pressure. But some enemy had got through to the buildings of the fort itself—no key point of the defence, but in enemy hands a considerable embarrassment. So 16 Platoon of D Company was detailed to deal with this infiltration. It came unexpectedly upon two anti-tank guns and an MG nest and these were 'completely wiped out'.⁴ A quick skirmish and determined use of the bayonet took the heart out of the enemy here and they 'broke and ran and

¹ Ross, pp. 115–17.

² Maj T. J. G. Pugh, ED; [Mosgiel](#); born Highcliff, 17 Jul 1904; farmer; wounded 27 Nov 1941.

³ H. McG. Farrow.

⁴ [Sgt D. G. Davis](#) in the 23 Bn diary.

many were killed whilst running'.¹ Then 16 Platoon joined with A Company in another bayonet charge, which Jeavons saw as he lay on the ground, 'a long straight line of determined blokes, bayonets fixed and firing from the hips.... I tried to give them a cheer but only got out a gurgle.'²

The enemy gradually withdrew to the south-west, covering his move with fire in a manner which made pursuit costly and in the end discouraged it altogether. Though the enemy had driven a deep wedge into the [Capuzzo](#) position, starting from the transport lines, 23 Battalion was never as a whole in grave danger and the

attack was beaten off without the help of B Company and sizable parts of C and D Companies. Even had the Germans not been recalled, therefore, they would have found that the hardest part of their task of capturing [Capuzzo](#) still lay ahead of them. But they deserve credit for an attack mounted with vigour and resolution and persisted with in face of fierce counter-attack.

It is all the more remarkable that the Germans were not regular infantry but 33 Panzer Engineer Battalion, which was committed by Rommel personally to 'clear the area south of the Trigh Capuzzo between [Sidi Azeiz](#) and [Capuzzo](#), clear [Capuzzo](#) and [Sollum](#) of the enemy, and drive him back towards [Halfaya Pass](#) ... the action to take place with all speed.' A whole regiment had failed on a similar mission the previous evening, yet Rommel chose to repeat the attack with this smaller force and stood by himself at Point 204, two or three miles west of the Fort, to watch the progress of the engineers. Two troops of 33 Artillery Regiment and two platoons of 33 Anti-Tank Battalion were under the engineers' command, and support was probably also forthcoming from the [Bardia](#) guns as well as from some captured British I tanks. The engineer battalion assembled on [Sidi Azeiz](#) airfield and drove forward in extended order parallel to the Trigh Capuzzo. On the way two companies veered too far to the right so that they approached [Bir Ghirba](#) and had to swing left, getting badly mixed up in so doing. Rommel, who stood watching this, urged them on when they halted to reassemble and they had to press forward in this unhappy condition, bringing up I tanks and nine armoured troop-carriers to lead the advance and cover their confusion.

This was the situation when 27 Field Battery opened fire and forced the Germans to dismount, some of their lorries already blazing from direct hits. The open terrain and hidden defences to the south and west of [Capuzzo](#) made the engineers swing northwards, so that

¹ [Sgt. Davis](#).

² [Ross](#), loc. cit.

it was luck and not skill which located for them the Achilles' heel of the defence

in the transport lines. The 37-millimetre guns of the two anti-tank platoons were driven and then manhandled forward in a desperate effort to overcome the defensive fire which swept the attacking force, and their efforts provide a remarkable parallel to those of the defending 2-pounders and Bofors. The commander of one of the platoons was killed and 'many of his men', and 'In the end only one 37-mm gun was left firing, manned exclusively by wounded men'. Even this gun was put out of action and 'the few remaining A Tk troops fought on with their rifles, shoulder to shoulder with the engineers'. ¹

Even this brave effort did not please Rommel and about 2.45 p.m. he sent orders by an LO to the commander of 33 Engineer Battalion to abandon the attack and disengage at once if [Capuzzo](#) were not taken by 3 p.m. There was no hope of taking the objective by that time; but prospects of doing so later seemed good and the alternative of withdrawing across the same bare, exposed ground over which the engineers had advanced with heavy loss seemed anything but reasonable. The CO therefore decided to disobey the order and continue his attack, meeting further success and bringing the total of prisoners up to an estimated 120, but finding that the hard core of the defences had not been breached. In the course of the counter-attacks by 23 Battalion the engineers found they were running very low in ammunition and, despite every effort to get more supplies forward, the scarcity increased, so that, as the unit report admits, 'the chances of taking [Capuzzo](#) receded'. Another message had come in ordering the engineers to follow 15 Panzer westwards, and after dark they did so, first collecting forty wounded from the battlefield—a task in which the aid of the prisoners was enlisted—and taking them to [Bardia](#). The trucks used for this last purpose had been meant to carry the prisoners and these were therefore driven some distance into the desert and 'dropped there', returning to their units after a long walk next morning.

The casualties are listed in the report of 33 Panzer Engineer Battalion as follows:

	Killed	Wounded	Missing
Officers	1	2	4 *
N.c.o.s.	3	3	3 †
Men	13	41	51 †

*Probably 2 killed and 2 wounded.

†Most of the missing men were probably killed or wounded and PW during the enemy counter-attacks.

To these must be added the losses of the anti-tank platoons, which are not stated in detail but which must have been heavy. At least two officers and about a dozen other ranks must have been killed,

¹ Report of 33 A-Tk Bn appended to 15 Pz Div diary.

judging by the anti-tank report appended to the 15 Panzer diary. ¹ These figures may be compared with those of 23 Battalion and attached sub-units, which cannot be ascertained in full detail but were roughly 20 killed, 30-odd wounded, and 7 missing (drivers who failed to return). There is no mention of prisoners taken by 23 Battalion and the total of Germans listed as missing must have been killed. Some sixty Germans were buried next day and other bodies farther off were found several days later and buried by Indians. Two armoured troop-carriers and an armoured wireless truck were also recovered and put into service by 23 Battalion, and two 50-millimetre and two 37-millimetre anti-tank guns were repaired and manned, while many other vehicles, including two light tanks, remained derelict on the battlefield. Rommel's last gesture in the frontier area had proved an expensive one and when he turned westward, as he did in mid-afternoon, he had nothing on which he could congratulate himself in any part of his 'evil dream'.

This action had nevertheless demonstrated serious weaknesses in the [Capuzzo](#) position and Leckie hastened to remedy them, redispersing the whole battalion with this in view, sending the transport of 28 Maori Battalion to Upper Sollum and withdrawing that of 23 Battalion within the perimeter east of the [Bardia](#) road. Reports of enemy massing in about brigade strength near Bir Hafid accelerated the reorganisation and 'All troops dug furiously', as the war diary says.

Leckie still had no news of Brigade Headquarters and now had particular reason to establish contact. The afternoon's fighting had yielded some documents which seemed to be of the first importance and he was anxious to get them to Corps or Army Headquarters. Leckie therefore signalled on various frequencies throughout the

night as follows: 'New Zealanders holding out at [Capuzzo](#) and Salum aid and air support wanted urgently'. No acknowledgment was received, however; but 28 Field Battery sent a message from [Menastir](#) which was passed on to Eighth Army at 2.30 a.m. on the 28th (and duly intercepted by the Germans) in this form: 'NZ Fd Arty reported an attack on [Capuzzo](#) from the SW at 1430 hrs'. Neither Leckie nor Andrew realised that the enemy had departed altogether from the frontier area; but Andrew did at least know that it was no use trying to 'raise' Brigade Headquarters by wireless, whereas Leckie was very much in the dark about what was happening elsewhere. Until next morning there was nothing to suggest that demands on his dwindling supplies of ammunition would not

¹ This report ties in remarkably well with 23 Bn accounts and even mentions the destruction of Stewart's portée.

continue on the same high level they had maintained for two days now.

At Upper Sollum 27 November passed with no more than the normal exchanges of artillery fire and the capture of two Germans who had had the nerve to go swimming on the beach just below the cliff, and a 75-millimetre gun was hauled up and put to use in the area of A Company. As sounds of fighting at [Capuzzo](#) grew, Captain Love got ready to receive 23 Battalion in his lines if the attack became too hot to hold and signalled accordingly to Leckie, who signalled back at 9.47 p.m. that 'My line shortened but stronger' and told Love to 'Keep your end up', asking as well for drivers to replace those captured in the course of the afternoon.

iv

With the departure of 15 Panzer from [Sidi Azeiz](#), [Africa Corps](#) ended a three-day respite in which only a few units did any hard fighting. ¹ This was long enough for the cumulative strain of the past week to be felt but not for it to be overcome and it needed a greater effort than before to get units back into fighting order. As with 6 New Zealand Brigade, too many of the old faces were missing for the remaining men to look forward with confidence to further trials. The force which turned westwards on the 27th was a foe far less formidable than that which four days before had overwhelmed the South Africans.

Rommel nevertheless signalled confidently to Corps at 10 a.m. that the British 'at [Sidi Azeiz](#) [were] already destroyed, and the destruction of the enemy facing your old front has begun.' He was anxious only that this enemy 'must not escape southwards.' His confidence, however, was less infectious than before and some of his immediate subordinates now had reason to doubt his judgment in a way that would have been unthinkable at the start of the campaign. Von Ravenstein was doubtless one of these. His 21 Panzer had been strong enough on the 22nd to recapture [Sidi Rezegh](#) but since then had been committed piecemeal, largely without his knowledge, and gravely weakened.

When 8 Panzer Regiment set out from [Sidi Azeiz](#) about 9.30 a.m. on the 27th it had with it the very weak 33 Reconnaissance Unit, part only of the divisional artillery, and elements of 200 Regiment with some anti-tank guns. In the late afternoon 115 Infantry Regiment followed, and after dark the battered 33 Engineer Battalion with its one remaining anti-tank gun. Cruewell stayed behind to tidy up and while so doing began to worry about opposition

¹ 5 Pz Regt at the Omars, I/115 Inf Regt and 33 Pz Engr Bn at [Capuzzo](#), elements of 21 Pz Div briefly at [Musaid](#) and of 15 Pz Div at [Sidi Azeiz](#), and Schuette Gp of 21 Pz Div at [Menastir](#).

Neumann-Silkow might meet on his westward journey. The Corps Commander thought the British might counter-attack from the north ¹ when the real threat was from the south, and when he changed his mind about this at 2.25 p.m. it was too late for Ravenstein's Schuette Group to disengage at [Menastir](#) before dark. Cruewell wanted all possible strength concentrated for the drive westwards and was annoyed that Rommel still persisted with the [Capuzzo](#) attack: at 3.45 p.m. he signalled to him to 'Bring all the troops you can with you.' His tactical sense told him, too, that 15 Panzer should move south of the Trigh Capuzzo after passing Gasr el Arid so as to avoid having to mount the escarpment at Bir el Chleta, perhaps against opposition. But here also he was too late: Neumann-Silkow had already allowed himself to get trapped by the lie of the land and by a British armoured force which for once took advantage of it.

¹ Hence the order to 21 Pz Div, rescinded at 2.25 p.m., to travel by the [Via Balbia](#) and not the Trigh Capuzzo.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 20 – ROMMEL RETURNS TO THE TOBRUK FRONT

CHAPTER 20

Rommel Returns to the Tobruk Front

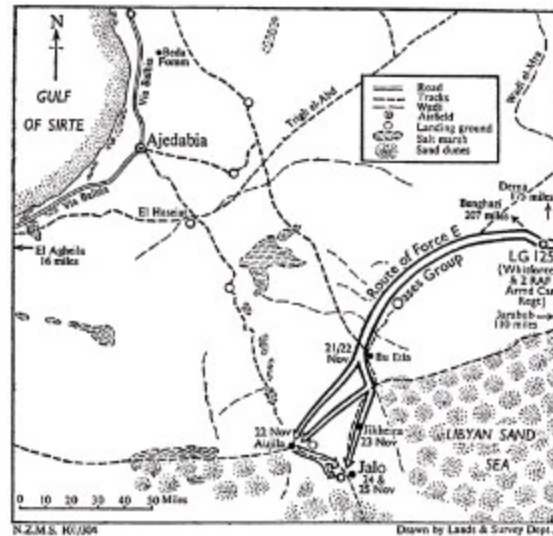
i

FORCE 'E' of the Oases Group had meanwhile captured Aujila on the 22nd, Jikheira (a dozen miles north of Jalo Oasis) on the 23rd, and Jalo itself on the 24th, after enormous exertions to get through long stretches of soft, sandy going on the fringe of the Libyan Sand Sea and patches of ground so rough that it made a mockery of the Cairo planners who proposed a major thrust through this region. (On the 22nd also 'Whitforce' began operating from LG 125, established by 2 RAF Armoured Car Regiment and ground staff 110 miles west of Jarabub, to harass enemy as far afield as Benghazi, Ajedabia, and El Agheila.) Only the garrison of Jalo offered much resistance and several subsidiary attacks had to be put in there on the 24th and 25th. None was easy to mount after such an exhausting approach march and in the absence of some of the supporting guns, which had to be winched forward sometimes through miles at a time of treacherous sand. The only way to take some of the pockets of Italians was at the point of the bayonet, and the 670 prisoners eventually gained cost Brigadier Reid 11 killed and 30 wounded.

The British, South African and Indian troops concerned had achieved much with small forces hampered by truly formidable obstacles of terrain; but they could do no more. Together with Whitforce they had attracted, as intended, many air attacks which might otherwise have been directed at 30 Corps and they had aroused much uneasy interest at Bastico's and Rommel's headquarters. But counter-measures other than air attack and minor reinforcement of Ajedabia did not get past the talking stage, and the arduous expedition of Force 'E' made no difference to Panzer Group Africa on the main battlefield, where the whole group might have been employed with greater profit.

On the map Brigadier Reid seemed within easy reach of the Gulf of Sirte and the obvious next step was to cut the Axis communications along the coast road. On the 27th, the day after he assumed command of Eighth Army, Lieutenant-General Ritchie signalled to Reid, 'Well done: Press on to Agedabia.' But the map did not tell the long tale of digging, dragging and winching along Reid's L of C, of inserting heavy

sand channels again and again under wheels to gain each time a few more feet of the 240 miles between Jarabub and Jalo, or of the softer going following lorries struck after fighting vehicles had broken the light crust of gravel which in places made all the difference. Force 'E' had used up almost all its fuel and, though patrols ranged widely, the force as a whole had to wait nearly a month under frequent air attack until petrol tanks could be refilled for a further advance. By this time Panzer Group had fallen back along the coast road and it was too late to interrupt its supply lines.¹



THE CAPTURE OF JALO

ii

Ritchie was by nature cheerful and readily accepted Auchinleck's view that Rommel's dash to the frontier was a last desperate gamble. Intercepted signals passing between Westphal and Rommel and Cruewell on the 27th confirmed his 'suspicions, which were already tantamount to certainty, that the enemy situation was critical'.² Now

¹ See Agar-Hamilton and Turner, pp. 417–36.

² Eighth Army Report, now written in the first person.

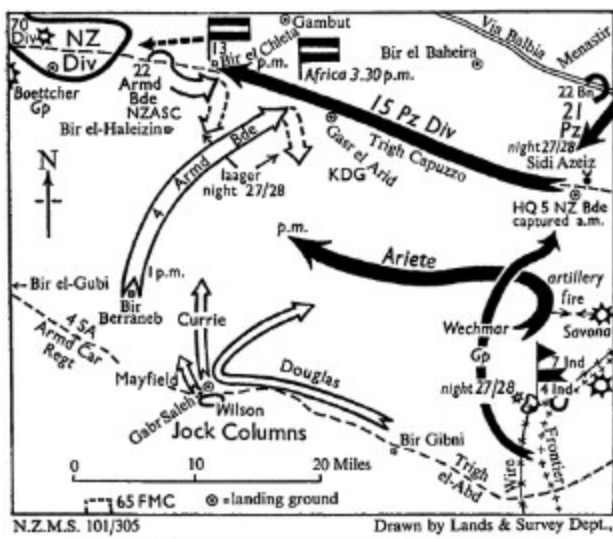
Indian Brigades could not yet take part in the mobile operations. If Tobruk garrison could supply the New Zealand Division, Ritchie hoped vehicles might be released; but the garrison could not do this for long and not at all if [Africa Corps](#) interposed itself between the two.

In 30 Corps similar sanguine counsels prevailed. The first thought was not to oppose the enemy armour which had yet to be defeated, but to attack the positional troops facing the New Zealand Division and their defensive wing stretching south to Bir el-Gubi. Norrie meant to 'assist the 13 Corps attack by threatening the enemy's flank and rear'; ¹ but he made no move to concentrate the Jock Columns and they remained as before facing mainly north near Gabr Saleh. Norrie's hand was strengthened, however, by the return to his command of 22 Armoured Brigade, which he says had never been able to 'maintain proper touch with 13 Corps.'

In front of the Columns were the armoured-car units, and early in the morning of the 27th patrols of these watched 13 Corps Headquarters move westwards along the Trigh Capuzzo, followed

¹ Norrie, 'Narrative of Events'.

by the vanguard of [Africa Corps](#). But the Columns could not do much because Ariete, moving to the left rear of 15 Panzer, was much too strong for them. After a curious clash with Headquarters of Savona Division at [Bir Ghirba](#), which shelled Ariete at a range of about five miles, ¹ the Italian armoured division headed westwards halfway between the Trigh Capuzzo and the Trigh el-Abd and kept the Columns well clear of the Germans. The King's Dragoon Guards reported the return of 15 Panzer (and its signals were duly intercepted by the Germans) and 22 Armoured Brigade now proceeded to head off the German armour. By 1.20 p.m. Army Headquarters had decided on the evidence of wireless intercepts that both panzer divisions were moving westwards, 'probably astride the Trigh Capuzzo', and accordingly advised 7 Armoured Division, at the same time asking for air attack on the 'retreating' enemy. Gott's plan was for 22 Armoured Brigade (with a composite regiment of fewer than fifty tanks) to halt the enemy 'from the front' and for 4 Armoured Brigade (with nearly seventy Stuarts) to attack the southern flank.



ROMMEL RETURNS TO THE TOBRUK FRONT, 27 NOVEMBER

The main enemy tank force reached Bir el Chleta at noon, thwarting Gott's scheme for his two armoured brigades to meet just west of Gasr el Arid. As late as 1 p.m. 4 Armoured Brigade was still at Bir Berraneb, 20 miles away; but it raced northwards and in little over two hours was bearing down on the left rear of the enemy at El Chleta. C Battery, 4 RHA, meanwhile brought down telling fire and the RAF found a splendid target in the bunched-up tanks and lorries on the Trigh Capuzzo, while two misdirected Me110s bombed Africa Corps Headquarters. By 3 p.m. 22 Armoured Brigade was under strong pressure but fighting back fiercely and the 4th was causing confusion in the German rear echelons. The diary of 15 Panzer speaks of 'heavy casualties among the wheeled vehicles' and of field howitzers firing over open sights at British tanks at point-blank range. Another series of thrusts came against the right flank of 8 Panzer Regiment as it tried to push up the escarpment above El Chleta. Everything Neumann-Silkow had was used to try to force a passage up the slope and through to the west; but he was thrown back on the defensive and more bombing raids caused 'very heavy casualties in men and equipment'.²

Only desperate defensive efforts beat off some of the British thrusts and tanks which came forward from the repair depot near Gambut were at once flung into the struggle. Even with these the Germans could do no more than hold their ground, and as dusk approached it seemed as though the British armour had fought them to a standstill. Had the whole of Gott's artillery been deployed here

¹ Attested by the DAK diary and by the Italian Daily Report to Rome.

and not in Jock Columns 15 Panzer might very well have faced disaster. For the first time in crusader

the British tank losses were not disproportionate to those of the Germans—about 14 tanks to at least 13 German tanks and possibly as many as 26. Gott felt that he had delivered a heavy blow against an enemy who was trying to escape and Norrie heard from Army at 6.45 p.m. that it was 'of the utmost importance to prevent the enemy escaping westwards, south of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment'.

In what General Norrie describes in his narrative as a 'fierce and bloody action' the enemy were 'finally routed and dispersed in all directions, mostly going NORTH and a few escaping to the WEST'. By the doctrine of the 'keep mobile' school, the British tanks like the cavalry of old withdrew from the battlefield at dusk to attend to their domestic needs, and the night laagers of the two armoured brigades selected in this case were five miles to the south. Scarcely believing their eyes, the Germans watched them go and then pushed up the escarpment after dark and carried on six miles or so westwards before settling down for the night in positions they had almost ceased to hope they would reach. It was almost beyond belief that the British would freely yield the ground for which 15 Panzer had fought bitterly but to no avail throughout the afternoon. The way was now open for a counter-offensive against the [Tobruk Corridor](#); but men of the two armoured brigades a few miles to the south, as they busied themselves refuelling and servicing their tanks and then enjoyed a well-earned meal, had not the faintest suspicion that they had conceded a most important victory to the Germans and placed the New Zealand Division in grave jeopardy.

General Ritchie had meanwhile ordered Norrie to send 1 South African Brigade to join 13 Corps and help the New Zealand Division on 28 November, which is what Norrie in any case meant to do. But Pienaar was a good 60 miles from [Sidi Rezegh](#) and would have to move at once to get there next day. On the way to him this order seems to have been watered down and its urgency diluted; but the German armour was in any case now able to strike across his line of advance, so Ritchie's intention

was thwarted and another debit has to be entered against the account of those who gave up the vital ground above Bir el Chleta.

iii

Reports of the afternoon's tank action reached the New Zealand Division a few miles to the west by various means and the sound of the guns could clearly be heard at Divisional Headquarters. For [General Freyberg](#), however, the scale and meaning of this action at his backdoor were hard to judge and his apprehensions were too slight to cloud his satisfaction at having at last established his end of the corridor to [Tobruk](#). At the other end of the Corridor Scobie's satisfaction was just as great and he signalled to Godwin-Austen and [Freyberg](#) at 11.50 a.m. on the 27th to the effect that a general enemy retreat might already be starting and that quick action by the New Zealanders in following through to [El Adem](#) was 'very necessary as enemy show signs CRACKING'. He was still expecting [Freyberg](#) to take over the Ed Duda position, and more than two hours passed before he learned anything to the contrary.

It was urgently necessary for [Freyberg](#) and Scobie to get in close touch with each other, since wireless signals in high-grade cipher took up to five hours to pass to and fro, but efforts from both sides to establish closer contact met with little success. A patrol of three light tanks of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, soon found the task beyond it, the enemy being far too strong across its path, and [Freyberg](#) signalled Corps to this effect at 4.45. Two staff officers from 70 Division also failed to get through from Ed Duda. Brigadier Harding, BGS of 13 Corps, flew to [Tobruk](#) in the afternoon to talk things over with Scobie; but even he knew too little about the present situation of the New Zealand Division to plan a detailed course of action.

Godwin-Austen had signalled to Scobie, [Freyberg](#) and Brigadier Scott-Cockburn of 22 Armoured Brigade as early as 8.25 a.m. to say, among other things, that 'Counter attack by enemy may be expected today therefore essential no further advance take place until present positions really secure'; but Scobie was ordered to send strong columns eastwards along the [Via Balbia](#) to 'bar area between NZ and [GAMBUT](#) and to establish strong picket east of road and track junction' at [Gambut](#) and to 'secure all landing grounds'. This meant opening up the whole of the northern flank of the corridor and breaking through the artillery and rear installations of Africa

Division and was far beyond Scobie's present powers. He was able from various sources to chart the return of the German armour from the frontier and, because of this, he substituted for the thrust to [Gambut](#) a scheme for a smaller operation to the [Via Balbia](#) at the junction with the By-pass road; but even this was to prove too much for his resources.

The Ed Duda position was rocked all day by a heavy bombardment, much of it from medium or heavy guns beyond the reach of 1 RHA, a scene vividly recalled by Lieutenant Brownless of 1 Essex in his appendix to the regimental history:

We divided our time ... between cowering in the bottoms of our very inadequate holes, eating, and digging. A little more than a foot down you hit rock.... We were shelled with everything from small-bore high-velocity guns to nine-inch howitzers. Quite a few of the nine-inch shells were "duds". It was a remarkable sight to see such massive projectiles bounce off the ground, and travel for another 200 or 300 yards, making a queer jerky noise as they spun askew through the air and then rolling over and over as they hit the ground. ¹

The companies of 19 Battalion, about a mile north and north-east of 1 Essex, were also shelled heavily at times, though not nearly so persistently. To the immediate north, some of the [Tobruk](#) I tanks sheltered in wadis and New Zealanders soon made themselves known to their crews and exchanged congratulations. Others of 19 Battalion accepted the surrender of many parties of bewildered Italians and a few of Germans which wandered into their lines. The enemy's rear services had been disrupted and many of his troops in the neighbourhood were much disheartened. One party of 120 Italians all claiming to be medical orderlies walked into the lines of the 19th before 9 a.m., and by the end of the day the battalion held 208 Italians and 52 Germans.

This was only a small part of the total haul, however. Patrols of 4 Royal Tanks and C Squadron KDG took 1000 prisoners between the By-pass road and [Belhamed](#) by 9.15 a.m. By the end of the day the total 'bag' was in the region of 1500. D Squadron, 7 Royal Tanks, engaged tanks coming along the By-pass at 6 p.m., obviously unaware that it was blocked; when one of these enemy tanks was knocked out the others quickly withdrew. Meanwhile Scobie issued orders to Willison at 9.30 p.m. for a thrust next morning by his cruiser tanks, a few I tanks, two companies of 2

Queens, and supporting arms to clear the enemy positions up to the junction between the By-pass road and the [Via Balbia](#).

iv

By newly-connected telephone in the morning of the 27th, [Freyberg](#) asked 13 Corps for the return of 5 Brigade and also of 6 RMT Company as 'we have only one mobile brigade'. Hargest's brigade was needed because 'We have only advanced by night attacks with the bayonet', he explained, 'and that, of course, has been costly.'² Claims on behalf of the I tanks made before the campaign, he now realised, had proved exaggerated; these like any other arm needed full artillery support in daylight attacks and this could not be given because of shortage of ammunition.

The position of the Division nevertheless seemed strong and the GOC wanted 5 Brigade 'for our future moves'. The attitude was anything but defensive, as [Freyberg's](#) PA, Captain [White](#),³ learnt when asking Colonel Gentry at 10.15 a.m. what he thought of

¹ Quoted by Martin, p. 634.

² GOC's diary.

³ [Maj J. C. White](#), MBE, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Dunedin, 1 Nov 1911; barrister and solicitor; PA to GOC 1940–45.

things. The GSO I replied, 'Grand, improving every minute... I give the General full marks for his stout heart. We would not be where we are but for him.... We will go on and clean the whole show up. We shall get them while they are running.' Gentry added that Godwin-Austen 'reckons we have so far saved the War'. Brigadier Watkins of 1 Army Tank Brigade was also pleased. The success of the night advance to Ed Duda by I tanks and infantry prompted him to comment, 'There is something in these night attacks in certain circumstances'.

In this optimistic atmosphere Godwin-Austen was a welcome visitor to lunch. In the course of this [Freyberg](#) put his view that his own division had suffered heavy loss

and now needed to consolidate its gains, and Scobie should therefore carry on by clearing the ground north of a line from Ed Duda to [Belhamed](#). Then the New Zealand Division might push on westwards to dislodge the rest of the enemy facing the [Tobruk](#) perimeter. This was in line with Godwin-Austen's order of 8.25 a.m. and was readily accepted.

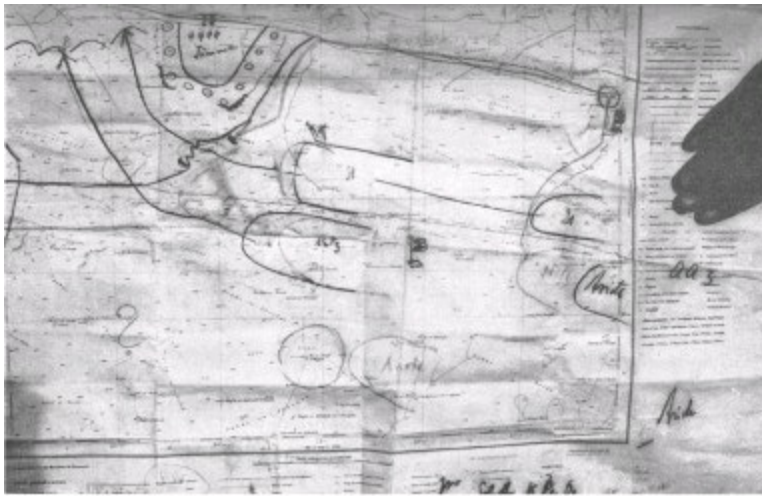
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At a lower level the situation looked rather different. The guns of 4 Brigade were mainly in the wadi between [Zaafran](#) and [Belhamed](#), well within reach even of enemy mortars, and both the guns and 18 and 20 Battalions on [Belhamed](#) were bombarded throughout 27 November. Counter-battery fire was a luxury that 4 Field Regiment with its present low stocks of ammunition could seldom afford. Only emergency tasks were therefore undertaken.

A lull in enemy fire soon after 9 a.m. coincided with a curious incident when two Germans advanced with what passed for a white flag to rescue a wounded German officer south of [Belhamed](#). The officer was taken to the 18 Battalion RAP and the two others, 'rather scruffy types', were for some reason thought to be emissaries of the commander of the German troops still holding out between [Belhamed](#) and [Sidi Rezegh](#). It somehow got around that the enemy was thinking of surrendering and this was what Captain [Bassett](#) ¹ at Brigade Headquarters was given to understand. When the 'parley' was prolonged the BM grew impatient and sent word to Lieutenant [Tyerman](#), ² the battalion IO, to 'give them 5 minutes to surrender', with the threat that if they did not do so the German pocket would be attacked. Firing had meanwhile ceased and most of 18 Battalion waited expectantly until the whole episode began to look like a ruse to gain time and 'allow reinforcements of men or stores to be

¹ [Maj B. I. Bassett](#), m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM 10 Bde May 1941; BM 4 Bde Aug 1941–Jan 1942, Jun–Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

² [Capt J. Tyerman](#); [Melbourne](#); born England, 14 Jan 1907; shipping agent.



Counter-attack on the Tobruk Corridor: marked map captured with General von Ravenstein on 29 November. The two panzer divisions were to attack abreast, with the 21st on the right, driving past 90 Light Division (top left centre), followed by Ariete

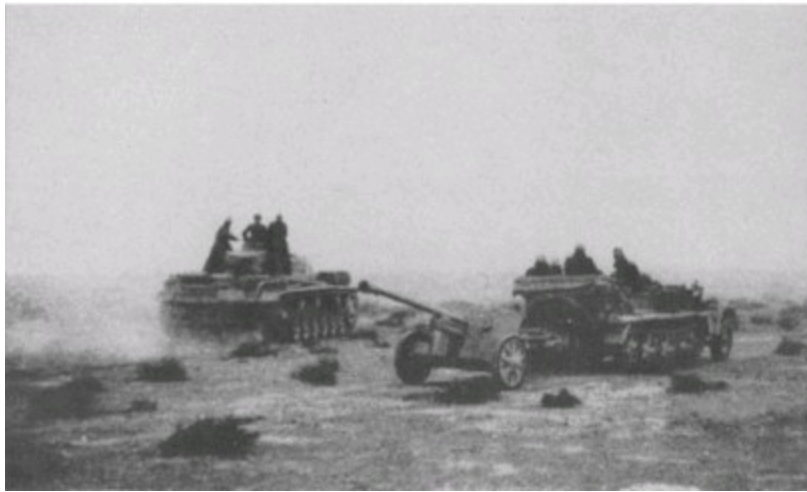
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15 Panzer Division bears down on 6 Brigade at Sidi Rezegh, 30 November. In the centre is a Pzkw III

15 Panzer Division bears down on 6 Brigade at **Sidi Rezegh, 30 November. In the centre is a **Pzkw III****

Closing in on 6 Brigade. A 'half-track' tows a 50-millimetre anti-tank gun alongside a Pzkw III



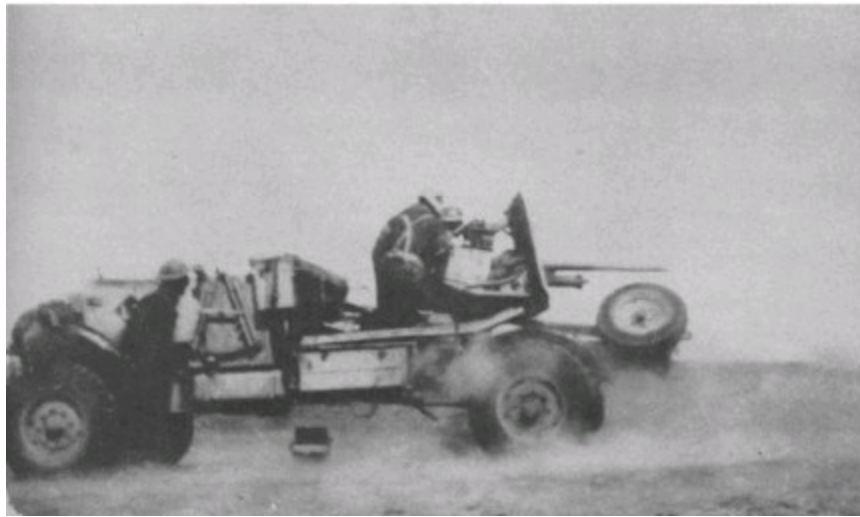
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General Freyberg speaks by wireless to 30 Corps on the 'Bayley to Bayley' link. The vehicle is a South African armoured car which broke through to the New Zealand Division

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A portée of L Troop in action on 1 December



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Smoke over Belhamed, 1 December. A 6 Field Regiment gun is about to withdraw. Enemy infantry are closing in from the left

Smoke over Belhamed, 1 December. A 6 Field Regiment gun is about to withdraw. Enemy infantry are closing in from the left

The same scene from a slightly more comfortable distance, with burning transport of 6 Brigade on the skyline



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A blazing Signals truck on Belhamed. The crouching figure in the foreground shows that the enemy is close

A blazing Signals truck on Belhamed. The crouching figure in the foreground shows that the enemy is close

Guns of 4 Field Regiment prepare for anti-tank action after Belhamed is lost. In the background is a captured German field gun



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Retreat from Zaafran. The remnants of the Division form up at dusk on 1 December

Retreat from Zaafran. The remnants of the Division form up at dusk on 1 December

Other New Zealand vehicles enter Tobruk



Other New Zealand vehicles enter **Tobruk**



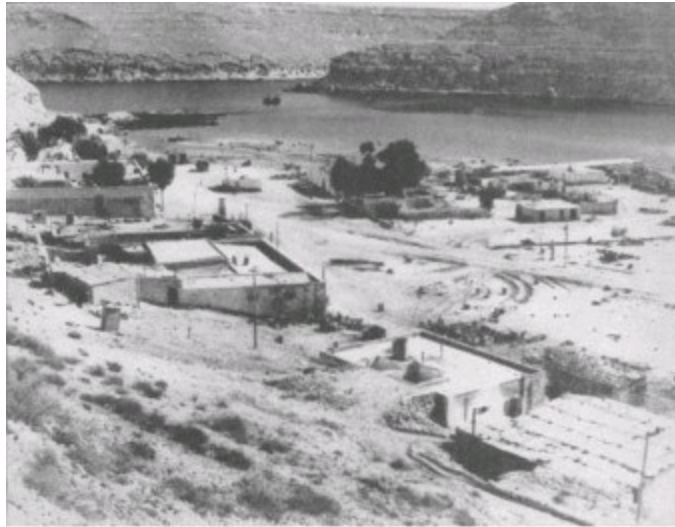
Lieutenant - General Sir Alan Cunningham, first commander of Eighth Army (after a successful campaign in East Africa). His brother was C-in-C, Mediterranean Fleet

Lieutenant—General Sir Alan Cunningham, first commander of Eighth Army (after a successful campaign in **East Africa**). His brother was C-in-C, **Mediterranean Fleet**

Lieutenant-General C. W. M. Norrie, GOC 30 Corps, speaking on the 'blower'



Lieutenant-General C.W.M. Norrie, GOC30 Corps, speaking on the 'blower'



Bardia

Bardia

Sollum from the air, with the barracks (top centre) overlooking the pass road



Sollum from the Air, with the barracks (top centre) overlooking the pass road



A Vickers gun of 4 MG Company in action at Menastir with
22 Battalion.

A Vickers gun of 4 MG Company in action at Menastir with 22 Battalion

Scene of fierce fighting outside Bardia. Probably taken near Fort
Capuzzo on 27 or 28 November, with German dead to the left of the
lorry



**Scene of fierce fighting outside [Bardia](#). Probably taken near Fort [Capuzzo](#) on 27 or 28
November, with German dead to the left of the lorry**



The thick turret of a Matilda holed in three places by a German anti-tank gun

The thick turret of a Matilda holed in three places by a German anti-tank gun

Transport under fire in the lee of an escarpment—a typical CRUSADER scene



Transport under fire in the lee of an escarpment — a typical CRUSADER scene



A corner of the captured MDS near Point 175: in the photograph are New Zealanders, South Africans, Italians and a German medical orderly

A corner of the captured MDS near Point 175: in the photograph are New Zealanders, South Africans, Italians and a German medical orderly

The prisoner-of-war compound after Bardia fell, with New Zealanders just released from five weeks of captivity



The prisoner-of-war compound after Bardia fell, with New Zealanders just released from five weeks of captivity



A Bofors being manhandled up an escarpment on the way to Gazala

A Bofors being manhandled up an escarpment on the way to [Gazala](#)

Stuka raid on transport near Gazala



Stuka raid on transport near [Gazala](#)



Italians captured in the Gazala line march past a much-used Vickers gun

Italians captured in the [Gazala](#) line march past a much-used Vickers gun

A New Zealand 25-pounder firing in half-light in the Gazala battle



A New Zealand 25-pounder firing in half-light in the [Gazala](#) battle



Lieutenant-General Ritchie, who assumed command of Eighth Army on 26 November

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Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen, GOC 13 Corps in CRUSADER (taken early in the war when he was a Major-General)

Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen, GOC 13 Corps in CRUSADER (taken early in the war when he was a Major-General)



Major-General Gott, GOC 7 Armoured Division in CRUSADER (taken when he was brigadier commanding the Support Group)

Major-General Gott, GOC 7 Armoured Division in CRUSADER (taken when he was brigadier commanding the Support Group)



General Auchinleck congratulates General Freyberg after the campaign

General Auchinleck congratulates General Freyberg after the campaign

General Rommel seated above the *Afrikkakorps* emblem on a German armoured truck, February 1942



General Rommel seated above the Afrikakorpscongratulates General Freyberg after the campaign



General Bastico, C-in-C of the Italian High Command in North Africa and nominally Rommel's superior

General Bastico, C-in-C of the Italian High Command in North Africa and nominally Rommel's superior



Major-General von Ravenstein, GOC 21 *Panzer Division*, in Tobruk after his capture

Major-General von Ravenstein, GOC 21 *Panzer Division*, in Tobruk after his capture



Major-General Neumann-Silkow,
GOC *15 Panzer Division*, mortally
wounded near El Gubi on 6
December 1941

Major-General Neumann-Silkow, GOC 15 Panzer Division, mortally wounded near El Gubi on 6 December 1941



Major - General Suemmermann,
GOC *90 Light Division*, killed in
an air raid on 10 December 1941

Major-General Suemmermann, GOC 90 Light Division, killed in an air raid on 10 December 1941

brought up'. The two Germans were bewildered by it all and the wounded officer when he was questioned was more inclined to discuss the surrender of 18 Battalion than of his own unit. Tyerman accompanied the two Germans back to their lines and there addressed a German officer requesting surrender. This was rejected abruptly, Tyerman returned, and the 'morning hate' was resumed.

Captain Agar, who then commanded 20 Battalion, had already been warned that he would have to attack this pocket and [Brigadier Inglis](#) now took it that the enemy was bluffing to cover his weakness and would therefore be, as Captain Bassett told Agar, 'an easy mark'. Agar estimated that the enemy in question was at least a full

battalion strong and asked for tank and air support for the two weak companies Colonel Peart (who commanded all troops on [Belhamed](#)) had told him to commit. Bassett pointed out that the whole of 4 Field Regiment and an MMG platoon would support the attack and considered this adequate. In a written order Bassett estimated the enemy as about a company strong about 2000 yards south by east of 20 Battalion, 'isolated and believed ready to surrender'. ¹ Captain Quilter, acting as adjutant of 20 Battalion, lodged serious objections on the grounds that the enemy had been greatly under-estimated; but both Quilter's and Agar's protests were brushed aside.

A firm order that the attack must start at 11 a.m. reached Agar about 10.40 a.m. and from then onwards it was a mad rush to get ready. In an awkward conference in full view of the enemy, he quickly briefed the two company commanders concerned, Lieutenant [McPhail](#) ² of B Company and Captain [Manchester](#) ³ of D, and these lined up their men for the start. One young officer recalls being told that 'there will be no fighting but we will have to put up a bit of a show and go out and bring them in'. ⁴ Boundaries were given in relation to a burnt-out tank to the front and the two companies set out across flat ground, thinly sprinkled with scrub and offering very little cover. Colonel Duff was reluctant to expend precious ammunition on what he understood was a very minor operation to overcome 'a small "pocket" of enemy MG and Inf SOUTH of [BELHAMED](#)' and his guns fired some sort of concentration at the start and again later; but, as he remarked in his report, there was 'little cohesion or real co-ordination between our concentrations and the Inf attacks and little practical success occurred, for the amount of amn expended.' Nor was Captain Johansen of 2 MG Company given

¹ Letter, 12 Dec 1941.

² [Capt N. J. McPhail](#), m.i.d.; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 24 Sep 1913; leather merchant; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

³ [Capt K. G. Manchester](#); [Waimate](#); born [Waimate](#), 5 Jul 1910; secretary; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

the detailed information required for effective support of the attack and the machine-gunners, knowing only in the vaguest terms what was happening, could do little to help.

Under these circumstances Agar's and Quilter's worst fears were soon realised. Within 200–300 yards of the start the attack became a matter of short dashes, and lengthening pauses, until progress was barred altogether by deadly and sustained MG and mortar fire. Many men did not realise the hopelessness of their plight until they were hit and perceived for the first time how few men remained unwounded. Second-Lieutenant Wilson of D Company remembers it thus:

After about 1000 yards I realised something was wrong. It seemed plain that we could never hope to take the position over open country without very considerable support.... the enemy certainly seemed to be overdoing his 'gesture' before surrendering. Finally the uncomfortable realisation came that there was no intention of the enemy to surrender.

Wilson himself was wounded and the advance was finally checked when the nearest posts were still some 300–400 yards away and the main defences some distance farther. McPhail sent back a total of three runners, including his CSM, to ask for artillery support, and Agar and Quilter who watched from [Belhamed](#) made similar requests—hence the later concentrations from 4 Field Regiment. A desperate effort by the mortar platoon to bombard the enemy positions by adding extra charges to gain enough range soon used up the mortar ammunition.

From a distance of 2000 yards or more it was not at all clear to observers at 18 Battalion Headquarters that those who remained unwounded in the two attacking companies met a deadly fusilade every time they moved, and Peart was not satisfied that the attack was being pressed with proper vigour. Quilter was somewhat abashed by a telephoned injunction from him to put more ginger into the efforts of the two companies, knowing only too well what they faced, and he did his best to

explain the situation. Peart therefore agreed to make a supporting thrust from the left by 18 Battalion. D Company of that unit was lined up at 1.20 p.m. to attack the eastern end of the enemy position. This move soon proved Quilter's point; D Company came under the same intense fire, went to ground, and made no further progress. Even three damaged I tanks which were committed here to help overcome the enemy MGs and mortars could do little. They managed to silence a nest of three anti-tank guns which engaged them but in so doing suffered further damage and had to withdraw, leaving all three companies pinned down and unable to move until dark.

Agar was out of touch with both his companies after about 1 p.m., when R/T failed, and he told Bassett about 2 p.m. that, since no more artillery support could be given, there was nothing more he could do either to resume the advance or extricate the survivors. In the end it was decided that 44 Royal Tanks must overcome the enemy, but it proved impossible to get the I tanks back from Ed Duda in time to revive the attack.

A wounded man ¹ who crawled and then walked back came upon Agar and found him 'visibly distressed' by the turn of events and by his inability to bring about any improvement. Eventually Agar ordered A and C Companies to withdraw half their men from the western part of [Belhamed](#) in readiness to fetch the wounded of his other two rifle companies and cover a withdrawal. A Company was to provide stretcher parties and C under CSM Grooby was to throw out a protective screen.

Quilter and Grooby decided on a bearing on which this detachment should march and at dusk Grooby led it forward. Enemy fire was scarcely diminished, the defences being thoroughly aroused and fearful of a resumption of the attack after dark. But MG fire on fixed lines was plainly evident and could be avoided. By circling round to dodge these streams of tracer bullets, however, Grooby lost his direction and passed through or round the enemy positions to the escarpment beyond. He could hear the enemy talking and moving about uncomfortably close but managed to make his way back without a clash, and it seemed to him that the enemy was as anxious as he to avoid a fight. A Company and the able-bodied survivors of the other two companies meanwhile worked into the early hours of next morning bringing in wounded. In 11 Platoon, Sergeant [Lochhead](#), ² who had done much to encourage his sections in the advance, brought back all his men, including the wounded and the

dead. Then B and D Companies did their best to spread their thin ranks over the [Belhamed](#) defences they formerly occupied.

B Company now numbered 32 and D Company 28. The attack cost 21 killed and 76 wounded, 14 of whom succumbed to their wounds. The high proportion of dead to wounded may be explained by the multiple nature of many of the wounds ³ and the many hours which most of the wounded spent in the open under fire and without attention. The wounded added two more officers to the long list of officer casualties in the unit and one of these later died.

¹ J. A. Macpherson.

² [Sgt G. L. Lochhead](#), DCM; [Timaru](#); born [Ashburton](#), 1 Sep 1916; grocer's assistant; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

³ As disclosed by the Admission and Discharge Book of 4 Fd Amb.

The composite squadron of 44 Royal Tanks reached Brigade Headquarters from Ed Duda in the evening and Major Gibbon was asked by [Inglis](#) to mount another attack on the enemy pocket early next morning; but Gibbon demurred on the grounds that he needed time for maintenance and preparation and [Inglis](#) agreed that he should attack at 2 p.m. on the 28th. [Inglis](#) now considered that the enemy position was 'about a mile and a half wide from north to south and rolled from east to west in three low waves of ground.' ¹ The night advance by 19 Battalion and 44 Royal Tanks to Ed Duda had overrun the guns immediately supporting this position, [Inglis](#) guessed, but the position still held plenty of mortars, MGs, and anti-tank guns, including some of 50-millimetre calibre.

In the course of the afternoon [General Freyberg](#) himself visited 4 Brigade Headquarters, at a time when [Inglis](#) was working out details of the next day's attack. But the GOC was much more concerned with the general situation than with the two-company attack on what seemed to him to be an unimportant and isolated pocket of enemy. The forming of a 'strong corridor with [Tobruk](#)' was the next task, and for this [Freyberg](#) counted on a major effort by Scobie. When a request came through from

Tobruk at 5 p.m. for the locations of New Zealand units, Freyberg interpreted this as indicating that 'Tobruk are probably doing something' of the kind he had in mind. Back at Divisional Headquarters Freyberg sent for Inglis about 8 p.m. to talk about the renewal of the attack next day on the enemy position south of Belhamed, but was by no means convinced that it was warranted. Inglis explained at length but left in the end doubtful whether he had persuaded Freyberg of the necessity, though Freyberg concluded by saying that 'if I thought it had to be done, of course I must do it.'² More hung on this question than either Freyberg or Inglis realised. This pocket was the last sizable body of enemy between the Division and the Tobruk garrison and vital time was lost in overcoming it. The abortive two-company attack was to cost far more in the end than the ninety-odd casualties in 20 Battalion.

A firm junction and free exchange of information between the New Zealand Division and 70 Division were urgently needed before the German armour could intervene. Over-estimating the time available, Freyberg aimed at forming a 'strong corridor with Tobruk'³ when what was immediately required was an unobstructed route to and from Ed Duda for operational liaison and supplies from the stocks in Tobruk.

¹ Inglis, narrative (1952).

² Ibid.

³ GOC's diary. Freyberg was looking to the ending of the siege once and for all.

Elsewhere in 4 Brigade the day was uneventful—if any day which provided such a jarring and persistent chorus of explosions could be so described. The eastern flank was consolidated under the command of a South African, Major Cochran, who had been acting CO of 1 South African Irish on Totensonntag and had brought into the divisional area a mixed group of over 100 South Africans, all anxious to continue the fight. This was joined by other South Africans who had arrived independently (including Cochran's brother) and formed a composite company. Inglis now put sapper-infantry of 5 Field Park Company¹ and 6 Field Company under Cochran's

command to form a battalion replacing 19 Battalion on this flank. The only action on the 27th, however, was by the 6 Field Company detachment, which easily drove off a group of enemy which seemed to be advancing to attack.

Patrols went out from 18 Battalion during the night towards the enemy position which Inglis was planning to attack again next day, and at 7.45 p.m. Colonel Peart was told to 'dig one Coy in the valley for the night, to be ready to follow a tank attack next morning', according to the brigade diary. At 11 p.m. there was a sudden warning of impending attack from the north. Colonel Duff of 4 Field Regiment hurriedly prepared a 'defensive barrage' and soon after midnight it began to look as though it would be needed. The whole brigade was told to stand-to and much noise of lorries and tracked vehicles could be heard from several directions, 'with flares and lights going up all round the compass'.² But in the end all was quiet.

vi

In 6 Brigade, Major Mantell-Harding of 24 Battalion replaced Major Walden in command of 26 Battalion, and one or the other of them ordered another attack in the afternoon on the enemy strongpoint still holding out on the escarpment east of the main position. This was another hasty action mounted without much knowledge of the enemy and it also failed.

Second-Lieutenant Nottle of 7 Platoon, who was given the task, was not told of the previous attempts to overcome what he was led to believe was no more than a 'batch of snipers'. He carefully reconnoitred but could see very little and was much surprised by the volume of fire the platoon met when it attacked from the west, in conjunction with feints by a single Bren carrier from the south and under cover of fire from a detachment of 3-inch mortars. The infantry got within about 100 yards of the western outposts and

¹ The rest of which constructed and manned a cage for the prisoners the Div now held, on the escarpment alongside the MDS which had been set up near Esc-Sciomar.

² Duff, report.

were then held down by accurate fire from what Nottle could now see were strongly made defences, including concrete dugouts and extensive field works giving all-round arcs of fire. Then came a shower of rain which Nottle says 'pelted down with such force that in the whole pl not one weapon would fire'. Small arms on both sides were for anxious minutes clogged with wet sand and only mortars remained in action. When bolts were cleared and firing resumed, Nottle could soon see there was no hope of getting farther forward and after a helpless hour he decided to withdraw. Bit by bit 7 Platoon edged its way back and the lone carrier, despite anti-tank fire, picked up all six wounded and brought them out. Two more of 7 Platoon had been killed; but this was not all. The strongpoint remained a menace to anyone who moved by day in the open north of the airfield. Brigadier Barrowclough nearly became one of its victims and his batman was severely wounded. In the evening when Lieutenant-Colonel Allen of 21 Battalion tried to walk past in ignorance of the danger he was shot dead, a serious loss to his unit and to the whole Division. ¹

Allen's death, which was not confirmed until next day, delayed the arrangements for amalgamating 21 and 25 Battalions under his command and in the end these fell through. Brigadier Barrowclough hoped thereby to form a composite battalion with four rifle companies at something approaching full strength; ² but there were many complications, and without the benefit of Allen's leadership these were magnified.

In the evening 6 Field Regiment shelled the neighbourhood of the strongpoint and Barrowclough ordered it to be patrolled after dark to find out if the enemy was still in occupation. He also proposed to relieve 24 and 26 Battalions in two phases with the amalgamated 21 and 25 Battalions; but he was shortly to learn that 'front' and 'rear' were no more than conventional figures of speech in this unpredictable battle, and there was no way of bringing relief from the pressure to which all would soon be subjected.

¹ Allen, who had led 21 Bn and many an added detachment with valour and skill in [Crete](#), was the second New Zealand MP killed and the third lost to the Div this day. Since Grigg also died of wounds and Hargest was captured, 27 November was a black day indeed for the House of Representatives.

² The diary of 21 Bn gives the strength this day of 456, but this includes a guess (undoubtedly high) of the strength of A Coy, still with 24 Bn. The strength of 25 Bn next day was 318, made up as follows:

	Officers	Other Ranks
A Coy	2 (Campbell and Henderson)	42
B Coy	2 (Wilson and Cathie)	72
C Coy	2 (Robertshaw and Ormond)	18
D Coy		19
HQ Coy and Bn HQ		8

The experienced riflemen in each unit were barely enough for a normal rifle company.

vii

Though Barrowclough still believed he was covered in the east and south by British tank forces, [Rear Divisional Headquarters](#) and Administration Group between Bir el-Haleizin and Hareifet en-Nbeidat knew better. They heard the noise and later felt the heat of the fighting at Bir el Chleta, and when the armoured brigades drew off to the south at dusk on the 27th their nextdoor neighbours became the leading elements of [15 Panzer Division](#).

For the harassed supply services of the New Zealand Division this was the climax to a day of vexation in which the only bright moment was when Second-Lieutenant Cottrell's detachment of the Supply Column arrived with a day's rations for the Division. The outlook was otherwise bleak and Major [Ross](#), ¹ the DAQMG, reported at 7 p.m. to Rear Headquarters of 13 Corps that probably two days' rations and water only were held, and petrol for about 50 miles, that reserves of ammunition were nil, there were no ordnance stores, 900 prisoners had to be fed and 700 casualties required immediate evacuation. A large convoy was expected from 30 Corps but did not arrive, no route was yet open for supplies from [Tobruk](#), and promised air drops of 25-pounder ammunition, now urgently needed, also failed to materialise. From the supply viewpoint things were going from bad to worse.

Rear Division moved north to join [Divisional Headquarters](#) on the Trigh Capuzzo during the day, facilitating administration and reducing the vulnerable mass of

vehicles outside the divisional defences. Then at 8 p.m. 22 Armoured Brigade moved through the Petrol Company to settle down for the night to the south-east, overlapping into the NZASC area. The Field Ordnance Workshops edged westwards next, after learning that German tanks and infantry were a mile or two away on the Trigh Capuzzo. The Petrol Company was assured that an armoured brigade was protecting its eastern and southern flanks, but this was evidently untrue and the NZASC and NZOC units concerned spent a troubled night, clustered south of the [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#). Next morning British tanks prepared soon after first light to give battle in the Petrol Company lines and by 8.30 a.m. on the 28th the NZASC and NZOC companies were scattering to north, west and south before the advancing panzers.

¹ [Lt-Col A. B. Ross](#), MBE, ED, m.i.d.; born NZ 25 Apr 1899; civil servant; DAQMG 2 NZ Div Mar 1941–Jun 1942; AA & QMG 1–27 Jun 1942; killed in action 27 Jun 1942.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 21 – INCREASING PRESSURE ON 6 BRIGADE

CHAPTER 21

Increasing Pressure on 6 Brigade

i

THE panzers which scattered the NZASC companies were not, as Eighth Army and 30 Corps supposed, trying to get away. They meant to 'clear up the situation south-east of [Tobruk](#)',¹ and Rommel and Cruewell met at [Gambut](#) at 11 p.m. on 27 November to decide how to do this. Again they failed to agree and Rommel seemed at first to be in the wrong. He wanted to descend to the [Via Balbia](#) and emerge from the area of Africa Division to attack the New Zealand Division from the north. Cruewell pointed out how difficult Neumann-Silkow had found it to make progress up an escarpment that was strongly held and was emphatic that the counter-attack should come from the south, descending the successive escarpments and driving the British back to the original perimeter of [Tobruk](#).

Rommel was well aware of the tactical disadvantage of attacking uphill rather than down; but he could see no other way of cutting off the troops in the Corridor. To drive them into [Tobruk](#) and thereby strengthen the garrison was the last thing he wanted to do. But the decision could wait and he decided to fly back to [El Adem](#). It was therefore left to Cruewell to 'examine the various methods of attack, hold a conference with Africa Div, and then draw up a provisional plan and submit it to Pz Gp'. But Rommel's time scale was still radically different from that of his opponents and what was to him a long pause was to them but a brief instant.

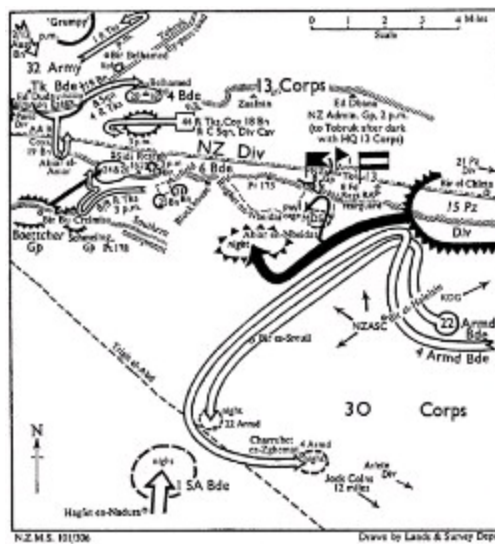
Cruewell at once took steps to ensure that 15 Panzer was put into a position from which Rommel's scheme could not be carried out. He told General Neumann-Silkow to take up an all-round defensive position on and above the escarpment and next day expand it to gain a favourable jumping-off place for an attack later that day. Early on the 28th, however, he heard from Westphal that strong British armoured and infantry forces had reassembled in the desert to the south in the past day or two and these menaced the southern flank of [Africa Corps](#) seriously enough to require a much stronger flank guard than Cruewell intended to deploy, thereby weakening the counter-attack. He therefore decided that Ariete, which was tailing along some miles to his left rear, should assume the duties

of flank guard; but he had little confidence in his Italian allies. A quick visit to Suemmermann's division, now renamed 90 Light Division, ¹ in the morning of the 28th partly reassured him, however, and he returned to his own headquarters in a more confident frame of mind. Suemmermann was no doubt in touch with Westphal, whose confidence in the situation was now returning.

On the 28th, events took a turn which was ominous for the New Zealand Division. Attacks by the British armour towards Bir Sciafsciuf were easily beaten back by 15 Infantry Brigade without help from the German tanks (which were stranded without petrol). Then, when the latter, after refuelling, resumed the advance westwards at 2 p.m., they covered five or six miles before being halted by shellfire and a wide screen of British tanks from south-west to south. The rear of the New Zealand Division and 13 Corps

¹ In line with other divisions in [Europe](#) on a similar new establishment, though Suemmermann's command had by this time been reduced to less than brigade strength.

Headquarters were now open to direct attack in overwhelming strength and were largely unaware of the danger. But two things saved them. The Germans jumped to the conclusion that the mass of vehicles was no more than an administrative 'tail' of forces already on their way into the [Tobruk](#) defences, a suitable target for artillery but not otherwise worth bothering about. Then German attention was distracted by the British tanks and 15 Panzer swung more and more to the south to deal with these, though Neumann-Silkow's 45 tanks had no trouble in pushing the 100-odd tanks of the two armoured brigades back southwards.



SWEEPING THE CORRIDOR AS THE PANZERS RETURN, 28 NOVEMBER

ii

Brigadier Pienaar's brigade, moving northwards to join the New Zealand Division, reached Hagfet en-Nadura in the afternoon, less than 15 miles from Point 175; but it could go no farther unless the British armour opened the route. Thus a tug-o'-war began between the New Zealanders and South Africans for the services of the armoured brigades as protectors against German tanks. At 1.30 p.m. General Gott ordered both armoured brigades to assemble five miles south of the southern escarpment and eight miles from [Sidi Rezegh](#) with the dual role of 'preventing the enemy withdrawing westwards'¹ and of covering 1 South African Brigade. The approach of Pienaar's brigade therefore seriously distracted the attention of the British armour at a time when the New Zealand Division was gravely threatened.

Though 15 Panzer was under orders from [El Adem](#) not to get heavily involved, some fighting took place in mid-afternoon and, as the history of [11 Hussars](#) puts it, 'the fortunes of war turned against the British armour.'² The 22nd Armoured Brigade lost nearly half its tanks, 21 out of about 45; but 4 Armoured Brigade seems not to have lost any and probably did not get to close grips with the enemy. The British artillery served a useful purpose, however, by forcing the German guns to deploy facing south rather than north-west, and the 15 Panzer diary bemoans this because it robbed the German gunners of the tempting targets they had located astride the Trigh Capuzzo and which they were anxious to engage.

To 30 Corps in the south it looked as though the Germans were on Point 175, which had been suggested as a rendezvous for the South African brigade, and more enemy were seen on the southern escarpment. There was no apparent way of getting through to the New Zealand Division, though Norrie noted in his narrative that he thought 'it might have been possible for determined troops to have infiltrated through by moonlight'.

¹ UK narrative.

² p. 210.

iii

At New Zealand Divisional Headquarters eyes were turned westwards rather than eastwards through most of the day and the many vague reports of what the German armour was doing attracted little attention. [General Freyberg](#) was far more concerned with the enemy around [Tobruk](#) and looked forward to the promised arrival next day—the 29th—of the South African brigade not to defend but to extend the Corridor. He started the morning cheerfully with a talk to Colonel Gentry. 'Everything looks better', he said, and he examined proposals for 'an Air Force Blitz and a Naval bombardment'. ¹ Meanwhile various operations got under way to improve the Corridor. These included a thrust southwards from Ed Duda by half of 19 Battalion with I-tank support, the operation Scobie had been planning to extend the northern shoulder to the [Via Balbia](#), and a second attempt by 4 Brigade to overcome the pocket of enemy south of [Belhamed](#).

The thrust from Ed Duda was a product of the poor communications between the two divisions. The object was to gain firm contact between the troops at Ed Duda and 6 Brigade, which was presumed to be at [Sidi Rezegh](#), though its dispositions there were the subject of much speculation by 70 Division. At Ed Duda the situation had eased greatly. There were only occasional reminders of the heavy shellfire which had made the previous day hideous and the enemy had withdrawn 3000–4000 yards west and south-west of 1 Essex. Patrols of British tanks, guns and infantry had gone as far as the Trigh Capuzzo without opposition, and at 10 a.m. A

and B Companies of 19 Battalion, with three I tanks in support, formed up and began to advance towards Abiar el-Amar at the western extremity of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment. Major [McLauchlan](#),² who commanded this force, halted just north of the Trigh Capuzzo and tried to make out the identity of troops 'on [SIDI REZEGH](#)'. He was puzzled because these 'did not appear to be digging in or attempting to consolidate',³ and they failed to respond to recognition signals which were fired. While still pondering this issue McLauchlan received orders through the I tanks' wireless to return at once to Ed Duda. While forming up for the return journey he saw guns to the south engaging the troops at [Sidi Rezegh](#), thus identifying the latter as friendly; but his own party soon came under fire and was hotly shelled all the way back to Ed Duda. Only one man was hit; but unluckily this was Major Williams, OC B Company, a very popular officer and a fine soldier, who was mortally wounded.

¹ GOC's diary.

² [Maj D. K. McLauchlan](#); [Sydney](#); born [Gisborne](#), 22 May 1911; insurance clerk.

³ 19 Bn diary.

When the two companies got back they were told to take over positions just vacated by the other two companies of the battalion. B Squadron of 4 Royal Tanks (with ten Matildas) was despatched with the other two companies under Hartnell on an urgent mission to occupy the northern escarpment of the [Belhamed](#) position. With him Hartnell took half of Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company, leaving the other halves with McLauchlan.

The move attracted very little attention, the Matildas moving a short way ahead of the infantry on a frontage of 600 yards, and it was not until the escarpment loomed up on the right that any opposition was met, a brief gesture by machine guns which the tanks soon discouraged. Some 50 Italians and 12 Germans who were 'occupying tents and caves in the slopes of the escarpment' came down and surrendered and Hartnell settled down, unknown to [Brigadier Inglis](#), to the north of 18 Battalion. The I tanks, however, were under orders to return to Ed Duda and

early on the 29th they did so.

The 32nd Army Tank Brigade made a move in the afternoon of the 28th from Bir Belhamed against the strongpoint known as 'Freddie' (east of Tiger and north-east of Wolf), intended as the first of a series of thrusts to shatter the northern wall of the Corridor. Rain fell as the troops were forming up and, when A Company of 2 Queens got ready to advance with D Squadron, 7 Royal Tanks, enemy to the east provided a diversion which lasted an hour. Though 1 Royal Tanks brought in 200 prisoners as a result, the delay only served to warn the enemy at Freddie of what was in store. D Squadron, 7 Royal Tanks, lost two Matildas in the meantime and the remaining six set off with the infantry but met fierce opposition which drove some of A Company back behind the starting line. Two RHA regiments did their best to silence opposition and by 3.15 p.m. D Squadron burst into Freddie and took 300 prisoners, most of them German. But only two Matildas and two light tanks got through unscathed and A Company was still pinned down in the open by fire from farther afield. Further stages of this operation could therefore not be carried out and after dark A Company came back under cover of artillery fire with the loss of fourteen men. Opposition was not crumbling on this part of his front as Scobie thought, and a much heavier attack was required; but by this time he had no troops to spare. He had struck, if he only knew it, at the part of the front where General Suemmermann had concentrated his strength in a series of strongpoints covered by wire and mines, and the scheme of widening the Corridor here was impracticable. At the end of the day no ground had been gained and the prisoners taken had to be counted against the loss of valuable I tanks.

While these various moves were taking place 1 Essex was left to occupy the extensive Ed Duda position with very few tanks in support. Since 44 Royal Tanks, half of 19 Battalion, and for a short time B Squadron of 4 Royal Tanks would not be available for the defence of this important ground, Scobie realised he needed more troops there. He therefore transferred 2/13 Australian Battalion from the relatively stable and quiet sector of 16 Infantry Brigade to that of 32 Army Tank Brigade, 'much against his wishes'.¹ Scobie had been given to understand that this battalion was 'not to be committed to battle unless it became imperative for the success of the operation.'² Their passive role, however, was irksome to the Australians and they welcomed the change.

At 6 p.m. the Australians moved off. Scobie saw them pass through the gap in the original perimeter and told them, 'Ed Duda must be held at all costs'. In the Corridor, however, they experienced a thrilling sensation as they drove forward in their lorries towards Ed Duda. For the first time in seven months they were moving freely across ground hitherto in their experience accessible only to stealthy night patrols, and they felt a wonderful freedom from the constrictions of the long siege. They were proud that they alone of those who were there in the beginning were there 'to the end—to the very end of the end'.³ As the Australians settled into reserve positions behind the headquarters of 1 Essex, plans (soon to be overtaken by events) were being made for them to attack southwards next day in support of 19 Battalion on a thrust similar to that from which Major McLauchlan had been recalled earlier on the 28th. The object was to recover ground seized during the afternoon from 6 New Zealand Brigade by Boettcher Group.

iv

Not only 4 Brigade Headquarters but 6 Brigade and [Divisional Headquarters](#) were brought into the planning of the second attack on the enemy south of [Belhamed](#) and there was an impressive gallery of spectators as the attack went in at 2 p.m. A concentration by twenty-eight guns of 4 Field Regiment⁴ was fired as the composite squadron of 44 Royal Tanks under Major Gibbon moved off, flanked to the left by carriers of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, and followed by carriers of 18 Battalion and then by two platoons of C Company and one of D Company. From the right flank on [Belhamed](#) two MMG platoons fired steadily 'across the front of the tanks'.⁵ It was all utterly unlike the pathetic efforts of Agar's

¹ [Lt-Col G. E. Colvin](#), then a major and acting second-in-command of 2/13 Aust Bn, in his chapter in the unit history, *Bayonets Abroad*, which describes the Ed Duda fighting.

² *Ibid.*

³ Clemenceau's words, quoted by Colvin at the head of his chapter.

⁴ V/AA Bty of 8 Fd Regt, RA, fired in place of 26 Bty, 4 Fd Regt.

⁵ Diary of 27 MG Bn.

two companies to get forward the day before, and [General Freyberg](#) was much impressed by what he saw. The tanks, he thought, were 'brilliantly commanded' ¹ and Brigadier Miles, watching closely, was satisfied with the artillery support. From the escarpment above, Lieutenant-Colonel Weir, who had such excellent observation that Miles put him in charge of the guns for the purpose of this attack, was in touch with 4 and 6 Field Regiments and ordered the first concentration, lifting it only when the tanks and infantry were almost up to the bursting shells and then directing 6 Field on to the second objective, where more prisoners were taken, with a repetition on the third. 'Everything went well in this attack', he wrote later. [Brigadier Inglis](#), watching from a carrier driven by one of his LOs, saw one of the carriers hit by an anti-tank gun on the left, then he saw the upper part of Gibbon's tall figure sticking out from the turret of one of the Matildas and watched admiringly as he continued in this fashion deep into the enemy lines. Captain Bassett heard what Gibbon and his subordinates said on the 'blower' and duly recorded it all in a letter home:

Old Stumps [Gibbon], long, saturnine and fearfully doggy, cool as a cucumber, opened at 1405 hours with 'O.K. Ai think we'll AD-vance now. Rito 2 would you mind looking at those wretched anti-tank guns on the left. Rito 4 d'you see that hill on the right—the one with the block-house and those square heads dancing about—do you eh? Well, those are mortars and more anti-tank. Do go and walk about it a bit. Rito 3 please don't keep shooting at my tank—you see mai head is sticking out of the turret'. (As indeed it was from start to finish.)

'Rito 7, Rito 7 (petulantly as to a naughty child) you mustn't go so far ahead of the in-fant-ry.'

Answer from David Ling excitedly, 'But I'm having such lovely fun rolling over Jerries everywhere.'

'Never mind Davie, you must keep with them—they haven't any shells like yours.'

Answer: 'I'll put 'em there all right.'

Complaint from Rito 5 that Stumps was off his direction.

'It's quaiite all right, I just thought I'd look at these field batteries, I don't think there's anyone left there, but I'll just tip these guns over. Rito 3 d'you see those derelict I tanks? Well they've got Jerry M/guns inside, just potter up and put a few shells through the gun barrels. Now I think we've come too far, we'll just tootle around and pot this stuff—has anyone got a match, I'd love a smoke while we're waiting for the infantry.'

'Now we'll go north, come on Rito 4, don't worry about that pocket, the carriers are rounding them up.' And finally, 'I think all this crowd are prisoners, we'll just huddle them up till the infantry collect them.'

Resistance quickly collapsed, and at 2.45 p.m. F Troop OP reported to 4 Field Regiment as follows:

¹ GOC's diary.

Tks well up into area. INF. well into area. Prisoners coming out in all directions. Firing practically stopped. Leading Tks are well up towards SIDI REZEGH. One vehicle on fire believed Bren Carrier.

Five minutes later another OP reported that there was 'still a little opposition' and that the original estimate of 150 prisoners was about a third of the actual total. At 3 p.m. carriers were still rounding up prisoners, but there was no more fighting, though 4 Field Regiment fired a few small tasks to help the mopping-up, which by 3.40 p.m. was complete.

This defensive position proved more extensive than most of the attackers expected and the columns of prisoners which were shepherded back by the infantry were astonishingly long. [Brigadier Inglis](#) says there were 637 unwounded prisoners, including a German regimental commander. The German documents throw little light on this engagement; but Lieutenant-Colonel Mickl of 155 Infantry Regiment was captured here and it seems likely that the bulk of what was left of his regiment was

overrun. Gibbon's squadron lost neither men nor tanks and gave an admirable demonstration of what I tanks could achieve with proper handling and support. In C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, an officer and a trooper were killed, and in a carrier of 18 Battalion a sergeant was killed and his Bren gunner wounded: among the infantry no more than one or two men were hit and possibly none at all. To those who surveyed the ground afterwards this was all the more surprising; for they could see how closely and skilfully the defences were laid out and how amply they were supplied with weapons, including field and anti-tank guns, mortars, and a multitude of MGs. A section of 6 Field Company followed through to clear a gap in a German minefield running south from the western end of [Belhamed](#).¹

Men could now move freely about [Belhamed](#) and [Inglis](#) studied this feature carefully, meeting Colonel Hartnell in so doing and leaving his half of 19 Battalion for the time being where it was on the steep northern slopes. Then [Inglis](#) went back to his headquarters at [Zaafran](#) and soon afterwards 18 and 20 Battalions changed places. It seems that Peart judged the western half the more strongly threatened by counter-attack, thinking this would probably come from the [El Adem](#) area, and he therefore put his own unit, as he thought, to the forefront. The change-over took place, company by company, without incident and two days passed before the full consequence of his move became apparent.

¹ 44 R Tks and 19 Bn had luckily passed through this safely in their night advance to Ed Duda. Later it was to help protect 18 Bn from panzers which overran [Belhamed](#).

At [Zaafran](#) [Inglis](#) was confronted with a series of reports about what was going on to the east, the sector which he had hitherto regarded as safe. But there was as yet no suggestion that anything more than an adventurous German column or two was involved and the chief outcome was that, since Corps Headquarters was under some kind of pressure on the Trigh Capuzzo, it would pass through 4 Brigade in the night and on into [Tobruk](#). [General Freyberg](#) also asked for 44 Royal Tanks as a covering force; but, following the afternoon's fighting, Gibbon's tanks needed fuel and ammunition and it was dark before they rallied. [Inglis](#) now took steps to strengthen his eastern flank, though at first with little thought of serious danger from that quarter.

In the morning of the 28th there was so little sign of enemy that gunners in 6 Brigade found very few targets. Men of 26 Battalion had dug in at [Sidi Rezegh](#) 'amidst a ghastly mess of the enemy dead' ¹ and were still too busy on defences to do much cleaning up, though they picked up their own dead and in due course buried them. Meanwhile 25 Battalion set up an OP on the southern escarpment, from the eastern end of which the enemy had evidently withdrawn. This reported enemy at various points to the south in the morning, but no menacing movements until the middle of the afternoon. To the west, McLauchlan's detachment of 19 Battalion from Ed Duda was seen but not identified until it turned back to the north; the enemy party which shelled it also shelled 24 and 26 Battalions and was driven off by 6 Field Regiment about 1 p.m. An hour later the 24th reported 40–50 vehicles just north of Bir Bu Creimisa to the south-west and three to four miles away; but these did not look particularly suspicious and 6 Field Regiment therefore went ahead with its programmes in support of the 4 Brigade attack to the north and of a fourth attack on the strongpoint east of 26 Battalion.

Colonel Weir personally went forward to register this strongpoint as a target and Second-Lieutenant Nottle of 26 Battalion was again given the task of attacking, this time with 8 Platoon as well as his own 7 Platoon, though the two together numbered only 22 men against the 24 with which he had attacked the day before. The infantry, moreover, were reluctant to attempt what now seemed to them a hopeless task. Nottle assembled his two platoons on the escarpment east of the strongpoint and then heard that the guns could not give support for another hour as they were engaged in support of the 4 Brigade attack, of which he had a splendid view.

¹ Cameron.

'It was like a book', he says; 'Arty, Tanks, Carriers, then Infy. & out came the Jerries... 800 all told'. This was just the tonic his men needed and he adds that 'morale went up sky high'.

A Troop of 6 Field Regiment was finally free to give support about 3 p.m. and began to bombard the strongpoint as Nottle led his men forward, not knowing what

to expect. Weir, watching from a derelict tank, saw the Germans go to ground, and when he judged that Nottle's men were close enough he lifted the fire. No opposition had yet been met and Nottle thought he still had some 400 yards to go when some Germans unexpectedly stood up to surrender no more than 50 yards away. The position took in far more of the escarpment than was realised and Weir was surprised to see enemy rising to give themselves up from numerous points he had not suspected were occupied. The total of prisoners was 182 according to Nottle, and twenty New Zealanders, mostly of 24 and 26 Battalions, who had been held in the strongpoint, were released. ¹ Major Sawyers of 48 Field Battery had an OP nearby and, when he saw a German evidently ready to surrender, he was quickly on the scene with his OP party and helped to round up prisoners. A regimental concentration, which Weir was on the point of firing, was not now needed.

In the strongpoint Nottle found an 88-millimetre gun, a far more powerful weapon than he expected to see, other anti-tank guns, several mortars, and small arms of all descriptions. The position stretched for 300 yards along the top of the escarpment to a depth of about 150, with concrete weapon pits and covered sleeping accommodation. It was sited to give command over the airfield, the Trigh Capuzzo below, and across to [Belhamed](#), and Nottle estimated that, if well defended, it would have required a full battalion to overcome it.

It was at 4.50 p.m. that word got through to Brigade that 'approx one company of enemy' ² had been captured here; but the brigade staff had far more urgent matters to attend to at that time than the disposal of prisoners. When the 24th reported at 2.10 p.m. that there were 40–50 lorries to the south-west, Barrowclough had been reluctant to direct 6 Field Regiment on to them since it was then firing in support of the 4 Brigade attack and he had no wish to jeopardise its success. At 2.40 p.m. the question was put more urgently when the 24th reported it was being attacked. For a troubled twenty-five minutes Barrowclough waited until at five past three he switched his guns from the 4 Brigade attack.

¹ Shakespear of 24 Bn, who was one of the prisoners (with an arm broken early on the morning of the 27th), says he and the others were well treated, a doctor did what he could for him, and he was given water, of which the Germans were very short. The prisoners were held in a small wadi under frequent shellfire but none was hit.

In the interim disaster had struck the outlying companies of the 24th in the west, the result mainly of rumours and wishful thinking by troops who had had more than their share of fighting, losses, and lack of sleep and were less wary than they might have been. The chief trouble was the persistent rumour that the troops who were advancing towards them were friendly, and it was this above all which undermined the defence.

The 24th was disposed in a semicircle facing north, west and south from the lattice mast where Colonel Shuttleworth had his headquarters. Although from there it seemed a compact position, the perimeter of well over 3000 yards was in fact too long and the ground to the west and south hard to defend against an enemy who overlooked it. D Company was on the western end of the escarpment with B along the higher stretch to the north-west, while A Company of 21 Battalion (under Captain Ferguson) was south and south-east of D. A Company of the 24th was south-east and east of Ferguson, and C to the east, facing south. Of these, numerically speaking, only Ferguson's company was worthy of the name, and that only barely, as it had some forty men.

The platoons were separated from their neighbours by wide stretches of rocky plateau or by wadis and bluffs along the escarpment which limited their view and made contact difficult. Under such conditions it is not surprising that the fabric of command wore threadbare and threatened to tear apart. Captain Jones of D Company received a message by some means which asked if he was A Company and said 'that the South Africans wanted to come through and to let them do so'. This was just after he had taken his men farther west in response to a Battalion request to take into his defences a wadi 200 yards away. The broken ground there narrowed the horizon, and when some of the men saw troops and 'armoured equipment' moving towards them these were not far away. A. H. Campbell, ¹ a private who was acting-sergeant at the time, at once notified Jones, who in turn got in touch with Battalion Headquarters and was told that the troops in question were friendly. Campbell pointed out that these troops were firing at his men but was told to hold

his fire 'on Col Shuttleworth's orders'. A minute or two later the troops in question were identified beyond doubt as Germans; but Campbell's men were 'trapped in a wadi' and it was too late to offer opposition.

Corporal Opie's forward sections opened fire at troops who showed up to their front, but they held their fire when these troops raised their helmets on their rifles and continued 'their leisurely approach'. This was, as Opie says, 'somewhat confusing'. But he

¹ Cpl A. H. Cambell; [Auckland](#); born NZ 13 Jan 1914; bushman; p.w. 28 Nov 1941; escaped, [Italy](#), Oct 1943; safe in Egypt Nov 1943.

could do nothing more about it, for it was at this stage that he received his third wound, a serious one, while carrying ammunition forward. Lying helpless in a slight hollow, he saw the enemy suddenly drop all pretence and attack in earnest, catching the defence unawares. 'This of course cramped the style of the supporting sections', he adds, 'who could not fire without hitting their own men, and they in turn were overrun.' The Germans then came under heavy fire from Vickers guns farther back and Opie saw one officer 'having trouble in getting his men to advance in the face of it.'

Private Lynn remembers a 'queer order' to expect attack from a friendly quarter and to change front. From the west a large group of vehicles approached and 'all thought the [4th Brigade](#) was coming to our aid.' Then more lorries were seen approaching from Bir Bu Creimisa and, as the two groups converged, 'the guns livened up and shells began coming in three directions and all falling to our right.' Lynn and those with him were told to hold their fire and there was mention of Poles and Free French. While changing positions Lynn saw 'troops without hats' in front and thought 'at last we are safe'. When a section of Vickers guns to the right rear, somewhere near the Mosque, opened fire there was consternation. Captain Jones yelled out 'For God's sake don't fire as they are our own men coming in', but the Vickers carried on firing for a short time. The Bren-gunner in a nearby section opened fire but was quickly stopped by an officer. Private Sleeman ¹ could see Germans through his field glasses and men of 21 Battalion had already fallen back through D Company. 'Next thing hand to hand fighting broke out and the Jerries

were amongst us', he says. 'They with sub machine guns and we with just rifles.' It was soon over and Captain Jones and his men were captured.

With minor variations, these were also the experiences of men of A Companies of the 21st and 24th, who were overrun at the same time. There were the same rumours and 'orders' to cease fire, and in the case of Captain Ferguson's company the same last-minute change of position which left his men even more helpless than Jones's to meet the attack. Second-Lieutenant [MacPherson](#)² says it was 'an almost impossible task' to dig in on a flat bed of rock under heavy fire, and when the other platoons moved he kept his where it was. A Company of the 21st had three officers, Ferguson, MacPherson, and Second-Lieutenant Hutchinson, but there were no NCOs at all and in a very short time no more than twenty men, the others having been killed or wounded by fire which swept in from the south-west, south and south-east. Hutchinson's platoon watched

¹ [Pte L. J. Sleeman; Auckland](#); born NZ 1 Nov 1917; painter; p.w. 28 Nov 1941; wounded while p.w. 13 Dec 1941; escaped, [Germany](#), Apr 1945.

² [Capt E. G. MacPherson; Kaitaia](#); born England, 1 Jun 1907; farmer; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

the enemy advance on foot in extended order with mortar detachments leapfrogging forward 'in excellent "fire and movement" ' until they were 400 yards away, when the platoon opened fire. Three times the platoon fired and each time there were shouts from behind for it to cease fire. Poles were spoken of freely in this connection and Hutchinson was puzzled and went back to the company telephone to check up. Looking back he saw his own men and Germans intermingled and hurried back to the front; but there was nothing he could do; 'nobody could fire'. It was all over. MacPherson says that as a ruse some of the enemy in front put up their hands shortly before the end; this coincided with fresh shouts from behind to cease fire, and in the uneasy pause which followed Germans appeared among them.

A Company of the 24th saw a tank on each flank of the advancing enemy, and though these did not come close they gave deadly covering fire, added to the mortar and artillery fire which was bursting all through the defences. Orders shouted from

post to post made men in Private Thomson's ¹ neighbourhood highly suspicious and some of them went forward to check the identity of the oncoming troops. When they found out the troops were German it was too late; they were captured and masked the fire of those behind them.

Thus three companies were lost, perhaps 100 men all told. Some 20 were killed, 20 wounded, and 50–60 captured (many of these wounded), while about 20 escaped unwounded. The western flank of 6 Brigade was now held by only B and C Companies of 24 Battalion, with a wide gap between them. These companies were no longer in doubt as to the identity of their attackers; but they found it hard to select targets which did not endanger the captives, though in some cases they were forced to take the risk. B Company to the north was briefly threatened, but a mortar detachment fired sixty bombs in quick succession at ranges from 600 yards down to 100 and halted the enemy. The sustained fire of the Vickers gunners from farther back also daunted the attackers and greatly encouraged the defence.

For a critical half hour C Company suffered increasingly from a shortage of ammunition and the Germans managed to close in and throw their 'potato masher' grenades, calling on the defenders to surrender. Two carriers rushed up under anti-tank fire and hastily dumped some ammunition to tide the company over the crisis, then two more carriers replenished stocks of '303 bullets in the outlying sections. From then onwards C Company was not seriously troubled, though fighting went on until dusk.

¹ Pte D. R. Thomson; Palmerston North; born Christchurch, 13 Feb 1915; labourer; p.w. 28 Nov 1941.

The carriers under Lieutenant Yeoman had swung round to take the attackers from the north—i.e., on their left flank—and from this direction they fired effectively into the enemy, greatly helped by Private Friday, ¹ a D Company runner, who had escaped capture and, mounting a carrier, directed its fire to good effect against MG posts. Major Mantell-Harding sent 13 and 18 Platoons of 26 Battalion forward but, though they passed through fierce fire which mortally wounded Second-Lieutenant Lamb and one or two others, they did not get to grips with the enemy. Shuttleworth himself did all he could to stabilise his front and was much in evidence among the

survivors of his rifle companies. Far from being downhearted by the turn of events, C Company was, as Captain Tomlinson says, 'very elated at the success of beating off this attack as by this time most of our platoons had been reduced in numbers to the size of sections.' B Company also held firmly, though it came under heavy shellfire which killed Captain Wallace, the acting CSM, and at least one private.

These events were followed closely at Brigade Headquarters and it soon became evident that the enemy effort was on a more massive scale than Brigadier Barrowclough had thought. At 2.48 p.m. the B Echelons south of Brigade Headquarters came under shellfire from due south, which indicated the arrival of fresh enemy forces above the southern escarpment. At 2.49 p.m. the 26th reported the enemy deployment 'in fairly large numbers' for an attack on the 24th: 'Now coming forward in waves over crest about 60 abreast also some tanks'.² B Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), with its Valentines was in reserve and at 2.55 Barrowclough ordered it to rendezvous at Point 157, 2500 yards south of the Mosque, and ten minutes later he told 6 Field Regiment to concentrate on the 'local attack'.

Thus about 3 p.m. Barrowclough had to sort out in his mind the relative importance of the 4 Brigade attack, the attack on 24 Battalion, the heavy shelling of the B Echelons and Nottle's imminent attack on the strongpoint. It was a curious mixture of the offensive and defensive, each in its own compartment.

The mentions of tanks in the various reports by the 26th were especially worrying. Seven were counted at 3.12 p.m. A few minutes later 6 Field Regiment stated that its 30 Battery was under heavy shellfire and two battalions were attacking it. When B Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), formed up to move off to its rendezvous Barrowclough therefore stopped its OC, Major Sutton, and sent him off to deal

¹ [Sgt W. D. Friday](#), DCM; [Rotorua](#); born Kawhia, 16 Aug 1917; timber yardman; wounded 22 Nov 1943.

² 6 Bde Log Diary.

with an enemy column to the south which included 'some AFVs', ¹ after which he was to keep the appointed rendezvous on the southern flank of 24 Battalion.

This enemy column seemed 'a most suitable target for the Sqn of Valentine Tanks' and the thrust seemed to go well. 'Major Sutton moved off rapidly and in a very few moments his guns were seen and heard in action in a brisk encounter with the enemy. The tanks were seen driving the enemy back up the escarpment.'² No sooner had the tanks gone, however, than 21 Battalion reported it was under fire from enemy to the east or south-east (as well as from the west) and attacks were evidently under way or impending from the west, south and east. He therefore asked Division to send another squadron of I tanks, and at 3.35 [Freyberg](#) signalled that nine more tanks were on the way.

Then 24 Battalion reported that its reserve companies had halted the attack from the west and the time seemed ripe for a counter-attack. Sutton reappeared on the scene and Barrowclough committed him at once to a second sortie in much the same style. He was to go westwards to a point roughly south of the original FDLs of 24 Battalion and then drive due north, thereby taking from the flank and overrunning the enemy who was facing Shuttleworth's reserve companies. The Valentines were to go as far as the escarpment where D Company of the 24th had been overrun and then return by the same route, 'shooting up the enemy wherever they were found'.³

Both thrusts, however, involved Sutton in harder fighting and heavier loss than Barrowclough realised. The Germans to the south and to the west were liberally equipped with antitank guns which could penetrate even the thick armour of I tanks. On its first sortie B Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), met 'strong artillery and tank opposition', destroyed a tank and four anti-tank guns, and killed about 200 enemy infantry, according to current estimates; but in so doing it lost five out of twelve Valentines. This thrust fell against a force under a Major Schmeling, detached from Boettcher Group at Bir Bu Creimisa. Schmeling had two anti-aircraft troops (including some '88s'), two troops of Italian field guns, some antitank guns and infantry, and with these he claimed to have driven off twenty-four British tanks with the loss of four or five tanks. 'Our own losses are heavy', it was reported to Panzer Group.

On the second sortie B Squadron passed closer to the outposts of 24 Battalion than was thought, these being no more than 400 yards from the line along which

¹ Barrowclough's report.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

northwards. But the German anti-tank guns were farther forward than 6 Brigade imagined and, of the seven Valentines concerned, only one came back in the first instance. In these two brief sorties B Squadron was therefore practically wiped out, a loss which was all the more serious since 6 Brigade had yet to meet the full force of the Axis counter-offensive against the Corridor.

Of the nine more Valentines promised by [General Freyberg](#), only six actually reached 6 Brigade, all that could be mustered by A Squadron, [8 Royal Tanks](#), commanded by Major O'Neill, who had already suffered heavy loss in the 20 Battalion attack from Bir el Chleta. Lieutenant-Colonel Brooke, CO of [8 Royal Tanks](#), also appeared, reaching Barrowclough's headquarters at 5 p.m., by which time news had come in that five of Sutton's tanks had been put out of action. Barrowclough at once committed A Squadron on a mission exactly similar to the second sortie of B Squadron, but with the added duty of doing whatever was possible to help survivors of that squadron. He also pointed out that it would soon be dark and A Squadron had better hurry. After what seemed an unduly long delay (though it was actually no more than ten minutes) the tanks moved off.

This time the I tanks did not go quite far enough and headed north through the lines of 24 Battalion. When they reached the RAP they opened fire on it and on troops nearby. A section of carriers was chased towards Battalion Headquarters and for a few moments there was a difficult situation until by various means the tank commanders were made to realise their mistake. Private [Muir](#) ¹ of the 24th crossed 30 yards of open ground sprayed by tank bullets and climbed to the turret of a Valentine to put a stop to this fire. A Bren carrier was carrying wounded back to the RAP when a tank came up, firing at everything in its way, including the RAP. Then it

stopped and its commander got out and was very upset when he learned what had happened (though happily no men were hit). He told Private [Bell](#) ² he had orders to 'clean up whatever he saw on the other side of the aerodrome', indicating that there had not been time to brief the tank crews properly.

O'Neill managed, however, to bring back two more of Sutton's tanks and returned to find the I tanks were still much in demand. A request had meanwhile reached 6 Brigade Headquarters from Division to use them with two companies of infantry to 'clean up the German Infantry above Div HQ.' ³ An LO had already reported

¹ [Pte M. Muir](#), MM; Mangakino; born England, 31. Jan 1911; line erector; p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

² [Pte K. C. Bell](#); [Auckland](#); born England, 16 Jul 1915; transport driver; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped, [Germany](#), Mar 1945.

³ 6 Bde Log Diary, 7.15 p.m.

at 6.45 p.m. that there was half a battalion of lorried infantry 'on ridge above Division' which had machine-gunned the MDS to the east. But it was too late and no such counter-thrust was attempted.

Three medium howitzers concentrated accurate fire on the field guns of 6 Brigade, and even in the gathering dusk it was impossible to flash-spot their positions accurately enough for effective reply. When they ceased fire an hour after dark, 6 Field Regiment still did not have all the information needed to silence them.

It was plain that the guns and vehicles would have to move out of sight below the escarpment. Barrowclough therefore suggested to [Freyberg](#) that the transport should withdraw inside the [Tobruk](#) perimeter and that 4 and 6 Brigades should 'take up a position with their backs to [TOBRUK](#) and facing EASTWARDS'. ¹ To this [Freyberg](#) replied that Corps had ordered him to keep open the Corridor and that he must therefore hold on to the present positions. An infantry brigade (first said to be Hargest's and later Pienaar's) was expected next morning, however, and armoured

support was also promised. All Barrowclough could do, therefore, was to redispense his dwindling resources as best he could to hold the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment, but with the defences now facing mainly south and east. This meant taking in Point 175 and thus creating an even longer front to hold with fewer troops; but there was no choice.

In a few minutes Barrowclough made up his mind what to do. Shuttleworth with 26 Battalion and what was left of the 24th would hold on where they were, but now facing south and west, 8 Field Company with a platoon of MMGs would face south on a stretch of escarpment north of the airfield, 25 Battalion would do likewise in the Blockhouse area, and 21 Battalion would occupy Point 175, facing south and east. To help with this last task, Colonel Gentry agreed to send a battery of 65 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, a welcome reinforcement. Brigade Headquarters, the field guns, and all the unessential transport would descend to a new area astride the Trigh Capuzzo, out of sight of the enemy on the southern escarpment. Thus 6 Brigade would form what the Log Diary calls a 'thin red line' facing chiefly south from Point 175 to about 1000 yards west of the Mosque, a distance of about eight miles as the crow flies but with a frontage on the ground of something like 18,000 yards, dangerously long for the troops available. A major counter-offensive against the [Tobruk Corridor](#) was to be expected and it was now only too evident that the British armour was not effectively guarding the southern and eastern flanks. All Barrowclough could hope was to hold on until the promised help arrived.

¹ Barrowclough's report.

The whole brigade area was in a turmoil after dark as these far-reaching changes took place. In the Mosque area Shuttleworth pushed 26 Battalion eastwards to take in Point 162, which was essential since he now faced south, and he drew in the FDLs of the 24th towards the escarpment. An unexpected stroke of luck, not recognised until next morning, was that the enemy who had overrun the three companies of the 24th withdrew about midnight, 'taking their wounded but leaving ours.'¹ A 2-pounder portée, the crew of which had been captured, was recovered and manned by a scratch crew and many wounded were brought in; but beyond this the 24th did not do much. The men were 'terribly tired'² and did their best to get

some sleep. The sappers of 8 Field Company similarly did no more than take over the ground they were now allotted and they left the digging until morning.

The mission of 25 Battalion was awkward, as it was not certain that the Blockhouse area was still free of enemy. Major Burton describes the preliminaries:

The air was cold and damp ... men wearing their greatcoats were dotted here and there talking in undertones.... Some were bright, some a little depressed....

At 2 a.m. on the 29th they moved off, wondering what was in store for them and seeing flares which they recognised as enemy. When Burton could see the squat shape of the Blockhouse through his field glasses, he sent Lieutenant Cathie forward with his platoon ready to stage an assault. Just when nerves were stretched taut Burton's driver jammed his motor horn and in a desperate move to quieten its penetrating blast he switched on the headlights, outlining the troops lined up to attack. But there was no enemy at hand and the Blockhouse and the escarpment on both sides of it were occupied without further trouble.

The new arrangements ended once and for all the scheme to amalgamate 21 and 25 Battalions and the former, under Major [Fitzpatrick](#),³ with Major O'Neill and six I tanks under his command, moved up towards Point 175 in similar expectation that they might have to fight for possession. After some tricky navigating they failed to find the place; but before dawn an LO arrived from 259 Anti-Tank Battery, RA, and led the group on to the feature, where the anti-tank guns were waiting.

¹ Opie.

² Tomlinson.

³ [Maj T. V. Fitzpatrick](#); [Auckland](#); born NZ 27 Nov 1909; solicitor; actg CO 21 Bn 28 Nov–3 Dec 1941; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

Similar difficulties attended the move of the vast mass of transport and the guns down the escarpment to the flat below, the former to a new transport area south-east of [Belhamed](#) and the latter to gun areas in the centre and north-west corner of

the transport area. From there the guns could give support to the whole brigade front by indirect fire; but they could no longer engage in anti-tank action in defence of the infantry, and to this extent the brigade position was weakened, though there was as yet no evidence of impending tank attack and nothing to suggest to 6 Brigade that the enemy had many tanks left.

vi

Though [General Freyberg](#) had emphasised weeks before the importance of the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment and fully expected that his occupation of it would be bitterly contested by the enemy, he had no thought of heavy armoured counter-attack because, so far as he knew, the enemy armour by this stage, 28 November, consisted of no more than 'remnants'. Thus he was unable to take the reports of the progress westwards of the enemy armour with the seriousness which the facts warranted, even when [Divisional Headquarters](#) came under fire and was forced to move.

Headquarters of 1 Army Tank Brigade ¹ with seventeen tanks (mostly Valentines) of [8 Royal Tanks](#) (less B Squadron) and 8 Field Regiment, RA, (less V/AA Battery) supported by 259 and 260 Batteries of 65 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, formed a tough rearguard for Divisional and Corp Headquarters for most of the day. Seven Pzkw IIIs passed within 500 yards of this rearguard just before first light, and soon afterwards an eighth was found abandoned without petrol and was towed in. The rest of the morning was quiet, but things became lively in the afternoon and W/X Field Battery engaged what was first thought to be B Echelons of the enemy armour but were later identified as 'enemy lorried infantry moving WEST along TRIGH CAPUZZO.' The field guns seemed to have the situation well in hand, however, and there was no sign of 15 Panzer, though this was only a mile or two to the south and south-east. At Divisional Headquarters the danger from the east or south-east continued to be discounted, and when the MDS near the [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#) was suddenly seized, [General Freyberg](#) thought this was the work of a small band of mobile troops and was not greatly perturbed.

¹ Which learned later that its Rear HQ 12 miles south of Bir el Chleta had been disastrously bombed by the [RAF](#) or FAA at 1 a.m. on the 28th, losing 7

killed and 12 wounded and getting 18 vehicles damaged. It was later driven off by enemy armour but returned to the same spot at 3.30 p.m. and reported its travails to Brig Watkins by wireless.

General Neumann-Silkow had ordered 200 Regiment to push northwards and gain the crest of the escarpment, which it did under shell, anti-tank and MG fire from the south. This thrust, led by 2 MG Battalion, came in the first instance against the New Zealand Main Dressing Station which had been set up in a large hollow between [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#) and the unnamed wadi west of it, and which included the bulk of the Divisional medical services. Most of 4, 5 and 6 Field Ambulances were there, the [Mobile Surgical Unit](#), 4 Field Hygiene Section, and elements of British and South African medical units which had arrived as refugees and were now taking their share of the huge task of caring for 900 wounded (including 100 enemy) classified 'for immediate evacuation' until they could be sent, as was now hoped, through [Tobruk](#) and then by sea to Egypt. Besides these there were others too ill to be moved or not bad enough to be evacuated. Nearby was the prisoner-of-war cage with at least 960 prisoners, some of them captured in the early afternoon by 4 Brigade, ¹ guarded by 3 Section of the [Divisional Provost Company](#) and part of 5 Field Park Company.

The undefended MDS was a vast humanitarian enterprise caring impartially for New Zealanders, their allies, and their enemies, and the pressure of work was immense. Patients were coming in all the time and preparations were well advanced to send cases on to [Tobruk](#) as soon as the route was clear. Fighting had sounded close at about 4 p.m. but had drawn away to the south, and there was no thought of attack when bullets began to scatter through the area, their tracers flashing through the gathering dusk, and German soldiers appeared among the tents and vehicles. The guards at the PW cage were quickly overcome and the prisoners released, Colonel Mickl of 155 Infantry Regiment among them; then 2 MG Battalion moved on to the edge of the escarpment, leaving the MDS in German hands to carry on its work. As the German machine-gunners reached the edge they attracted MG and 2-pounder fire, and 18-pounders of Q Troop, 34 Anti-Tank Battery, also fired into the area in ignorance of the whereabouts of the MDS. Thus the wounded began a further ordeal at the wrong end of guns and mortars of the New Zealand Division and later of the Jock Columns from the south, and some of them and a few of the staff were killed and more wounds were added to the hundreds already under treatment.

As another section of the [Provost Company](#) was making its way up the escarpment at ten past five to relieve 3 Section, it came most unexpectedly under MG fire and hastily retreated. Enemy armoured cars appeared on the crest and began spraying the ground

¹ The figure of 960 prisoners in the cage seems the best estimate and there were about 1500 all told in the Division, indicating that some but not all of those taken by 4 Bde in the afternoon reached the Div cage. Others were taken into [Tobruk](#).

below with bullets, to which anti-tank guns (including those of 259 Battery, 65 Regiment, RA) replied, and then some Valentines of [8 Royal Tanks](#) came on the scene and the German armoured cars did not wait to argue with them.

All that faced 15 Panzer here in the first instance was 'B Group' of [Divisional Headquarters](#) under Lieutenant-Colonel Oakes ¹ of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, a makeshift organisation reminiscent of [Oakes Force](#) in [Crete](#). Besides the anti-tank guns B Group had three Bofors of 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery and ancient Mark VIB tanks of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, joined later by a few recaptured Stuart tanks, inexpertly manned. The I tanks were not part of the group, though their help was welcomed.

This small force, including whatever the various unit headquarters in the neighbourhood could muster in the way of rough-and-ready infantry, faced eastwards along the Trigh Capuzzo with its right flank below the escarpment. The assumption that 22 Armoured Brigade was guarding this flank had yet to be disproved and, since Brigadier Watkins's and Godwin-Austen's headquarters were still to the east, B Group could reasonably expect fair warning of any attack. None was given and bullets suddenly started whipping through the area from above. 'We destroyed a number of M.T. and had some first-class shooting at dismounted infantry', the diary of 259 Anti-Tank Battery states; 'but no tanks approached.' This battery had one portée badly damaged by MG fire and a gunner wounded, as well as '7 flat portée tyres'.

RSM Gilberd's ² 'platoon' of men from RHQ 7 Anti-Tank Regiment counter-

attacked up the escarpment at the point where firing broke out and occupied the crest unopposed. Firing soon died down and in a few more minutes daylight had faded and the scene was lit only by a blazing vehicle on the crest and frequent flares to the south. These added vigour to the digging of local defences; B Group formed an outer circle and the Defence and Employment Platoon and the remaining provost NCOs an inner circle around G Branch office, which for a few minutes had been in some danger. Later in the night [Divisional Headquarters](#) moved westwards.

The NZASC companies and Ordnance Workshops which had scattered in front of the advancing German armour in the morning were reassembled by degrees south of [Ed Dbana](#) in the afternoon, where for a time they were shelled. In the meantime A & Q Branch signalled to Eighth Army for 200 stretchers and 600 blankets for wounded and prisoners and to [Tobruk](#) for 25-pounder ammunition

¹ Lt-Col T. H. E. Oakes, MC and bar, m.i.d.; born England, 24 Mar 1895; RA (ret'd); CO 7 A-Tk Regt May–Nov 1941; killed in action 30 Nov 1941.

² [Capt J. G. Gilberd](#); [Wellington](#); born [Napier](#), 2 Apr 1910; Regular soldier.

'by any means ... urgently'. The routine report to 13 Corps stated at 4.45 that there was ammunition and water for one day only, petrol for 50 miles, little ammunition for infantry weapons and only 20 r.p.g. for the field guns, though the actual situation was rather better. It now seemed unlikely that supplies would come from anywhere but [Tobruk](#), and the mass of empty lorries in the Divisional area served only to hamper the defence. Administration Group and [Rear Divisional Headquarters](#) were therefore ordered to move into [Tobruk](#) during the night.

For similar reasons General Godwin-Austen decided to do the same with his own headquarters and attached elements of 30 Corps Headquarters, and he signalled accordingly to all concerned at 6.45 p.m.:

As enemy force advancing WESTWARDS astride TRIGH CAPUZZO attacked HQ 13 Corps and ... am moving Corps HQ straight into [TOBRUK](#). Corridor will be kept open at all costs. NZ DIV report from unreliable information ARIETE Div following

westwards along TRIGH CAPUZZO. Do NOT attach much credence to this. No supplies of any nature received by land or air.

The second sentence rang loud in Freyberg's ears and caused him to veto Barrowclough's scheme to draw in towards Tobruk and then face outwards to meet the counter-attack. The Corridor, he concluded, would have to be kept intact; but it was now no more than an appendix from the original Tobruk perimeter, blocking the Trigh Capuzzo and the By-pass road, though the enemy could still get round the obstruction. Like the vermiform appendix of the human body, its significance was shrinking and it was doomed to be amputated if adequate steps were not taken to protect it.

vii

It was a step in the right direction, however, to get rid of the unessential transport. After dark on the 28th the Corridor became a jostling bedlam of vehicles edging forward by degrees through 4 Brigade, through or round the Belhamed minefield, across to Ed Duda, and then into a narrow funnel through the deep minefields surrounding Tobruk. Such a journey at such short notice was beyond the ability of the best of staffs to organise like clockwork and mishaps were inevitable. Captain Bassett spent four hours at 4 Brigade Headquarters with an ear to the telephone arranging rendezvous and guides and trying as best he could to smooth the passage of all sorts of detachments driving unseen through the night. Had the drivers all been wide awake the journey would have been hard enough; but most of them had had little or no sleep for days and in the numerous halts they could not help dozing off. 'One bad check, again through drivers going to sleep,' the A & Q diary says, 'resulted in the front of the coln being lost, leaving the tail of the Adm Gp and Rear Div without guides.' For those detachments, including most of Rear Headquarters, which halted on the By-pass near Ed Duda awaiting guides, the approach of dawn on the 29th was anything but welcome. To go on might mean running into enemy positions or minefields, yet to stay would certainly mean revealing themselves 'in an extremely exposed position' ¹ when daylight came. Guides from 70 Division arrived just in time and led the vehicles through the Corridor into Tobruk, passing on the way forty-two lorries carrying 3600 urgently needed rounds of 25-pounder ammunition and other supplies to 4 Brigade. Many NZASC

sections had no idea where they were meant to go. The Petrol Company diary, for example, says 'Convoy completely broken and mixed, and diverted into a circle.... Utmost confusion caused by outgoing vehicles [the 42-lorry convoy], and all touch lost with leader of main convoy.' Then a guide from 1 Essex arrived. The vehicles in front, he pointed out, had gone to [Tobruk](#)—the first time the Company heard of its destination. But the time was now 5 a.m. and the lorries would have to cross a ridge which was under constant shellfire in daylight, and they would therefore have to move fast 'to clear jam before daybreak'. They did not quite succeed and some shells fell among them before they got out of sight of enemy gunners. ²

The 42-lorry supply column somehow struggled upstream against the flow of vehicles into [Tobruk](#) and delivered its valuable cargo to 4 Brigade. At the same time another and larger supply column, 260 lorries, which had been assembled in the frontier area (and included seven of Sergeant Plumtree's Petrol Company lorries), threaded its way northwards from 62 FMC. It was led by Brigadier Clifton and escorted by seventeen Stuart tanks, eight South African armoured cars, and some 2-pounder portées, and in the middle of the night it reached the escarpment two miles east of Point 175. The armoured cars, trying to find a way down, entered the captured MDS in the dark but quickly withdrew, and the long column descended to the Trigh Capuzzo and headed westwards. Though enemy flares had risen in all directions for the last ten miles not a shot was fired at these lorries, and they entered the lines of 8 Field

¹ A & Q diary.

² When 13 Corps HQ reached [Tobruk](#), General Godwin-Austen signalled to Eighth Army that the Corridor was 'perfectly secure and open to passage [of] our troops and will be kept so.' It was an auspicious occasion, and he marked it with his ready wit by concluding: 'Press may be informed that Tobruk is as relieved as I am'.

Regiment, RA, some hours before dawn on the 29th. Leaving six lorry-loads of ammunition with the gunners, who were down to six rounds per gun, Clifton pushed on for a few miles and then halted at 3.30 a.m., still short of [Divisional Headquarters](#), and the drivers enjoyed two well-earned hours of sleep. As well as

4000 rounds for the 25-pounders, they had brought the Division 37,000 gallons of water, 15,000 rations, a large quantity of POL, and other invaluable supplies. With the 42 lorries from [Tobruk](#), this eased the supply situation, though the further outlook remained unsettled. [General Freyberg](#) also welcomed the escorting tanks; but he readily agreed when told that they were more urgently needed by 4 Armoured Brigade.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 22 – COUNTER-ATTACK ON THE TOBRUK CORRIDOR

CHAPTER 22

Counter-attack on the Tobruk Corridor

i

GENERAL Rommel could now, for the first time in five days, make use of the planning resources of his own headquarters at [El Adem](#) and of the fighting strength not only of [Africa Corps](#) and [Ariete](#) but of [Boettcher Group](#), [90 Light Division](#), [Trieste](#), [Pavia](#), [Trento](#) and [Bologna Divisions](#), and the German and Italian Army Artillery. For this reason he flew with General Gause to [El Adem](#) on the 28th, hoping to talk things over with Generals [Boettcher](#) and [Suemmermann](#) and [Navarrini](#) of [21 Corps](#). [Suemmermann](#) was on the wrong side of the Corridor and he did not see him; but he met General [Gambara](#) and also his own nominal superior, General [Bastico](#), who was worried about the loss of [Jalo](#) and [Aujila](#) and about the situation as a whole, and therefore paid one of his rare visits to Rommel's headquarters. [Bastico](#) was doing all he could to strengthen the defences of [Gazala](#), behind the [Tobruk](#) front, and of [Ajedabia](#) on the Gulf of [Sirte](#).

Meanwhile the battle drifted (or was guided by [Cruewell](#)) into a shape which made Rommel's plan to push southwards from the [Via Balbia](#) less and less feasible. As late as 7.45 p.m. on the 28th [Cruewell](#) nevertheless pretended to [Panzer Group](#) that a choice between Rommel's scheme and his own still existed and asked urgently for orders. This was a stratagem he had used several times before when looking for an excuse to act on his own initiative, and by 8 p.m. he judged the time was ripe. He set out a plan to attack to the west and north-west at ten o'clock next morning with [21 Panzer](#) on the right, [15 Panzer](#) on the left, and [Ariete](#) covering the left rear. The starting line ran from [Zaafran](#) to [Sidi Rezegh](#) and the objective was the original perimeter of [Tobruk](#) at the base of the Corridor. [Cruewell](#) thus hoped to overrun the whole of the Corridor from end to end in one swift, violent action startig (if he did but know it) from the heart of the [New Zealand Division](#). The conception was not unlike that of the [Totensonntag](#) attack; but the ground and the opposition were very different. Had [Cruewell](#) spent his time while awaiting Rommel's orders in amassing and weighing information about the forces he faced, he might have proposed something more practicable; but this was not his way. He sensed rightly that time was vital, but it was equally vital to strike in the right spot. He sorely missed the

staff and facilities he had lost at Bir el Chleta on the 23rd; but Neumann-Silkow's staff was at hand and it would have been more sensible to use the two remaining patrols of 33 Reconnaissance Unit to find out what lay ahead rather than for them to push, as they did, ineffectually against the 'thick protective screen' ¹ of the British armour to the south. The much stronger 3 Reconnaissance Unit which was under Corps command could also have probed ahead; but it was committed again to defend the pass south of [Gambut](#) from which [Colonel Kippenberger](#) had driven it on the 24th. Without proper reconnaissance Cruewell could only guess the nature and location of the opposition he proposed to crush with one blow. Eighth Army thought of the enemy armour as a force bent on making its escape; Cruewell (and Rommel too) imagined that the New Zealand Division and other troops in the Corridor area were trying to shelter behind the [Tobruk](#) defences and he wanted to drive right through them before they could reach this haven.

Had Cruewell known more about his own troops he might have had second thoughts. But he had been out of personal touch with 21 Panzer for several days and did not realise how low it now was in strength and morale. This was evident in the person of its GOC, General von Ravenstein, who bore obvious signs of strain, as the Corps diarist noted, when he reported in at 8.30 p.m. and received his copy of the operation order. Ravenstein still had a fair complement of artillery, but only a handful of tanks, and his infantry battalion and machine-gun battalion were much the worse for wear. Yet by Cruewell's plan these remnants of the once-proud [21 Panzer Division](#) would have to make their way through half the New Zealand Division just to reach the starting line for the counter-attack. It was a hopeless assignment, as both generals were soon to discover, and there was little that 21 Panzer in its weakened state could contribute to the coming operation.

The next stage of planning followed familiar lines. Rommel's order reached Corps at 9.20 p.m. on the 28th and differed from Cruewell's in that it proposed an encircling movement rather than a single sledgehammer blow. Rommel had at least partly given up the idea of attacking from the [Via Balbia](#) and now wanted [Africa Corps](#) to mount a concentric attack from the east, south and south-west against the 'Enemy in the area [Belhamed](#) and south' and prevent him from 'escaping into [Tobruk](#)'. ²

¹ Report by 33 Recce Unit in DAK diary.

² DAK diary.

Cruewell had two objections. The attack from the south-west could not be carried out without first overcoming the enemy at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and would therefore have to be deferred until a later stage. And the only way he could see of cutting off the retreat of the force in question was to attack from the area of 90 Light Division north of [Belhamed](#) westwards across the rear of the Ed Duda position, which was what he had strenuously opposed from the start. 'Also it was too late to alter the orders already given', the Corps diary added, not for the first time. ¹

Belatedly realising how little he knew of the opposition, at 6.22 a.m. on the 29th Cruewell ordered both divisions to send out strong fighting-reconnaissance patrols. But little could have come of this, because as late as 8 a.m. ² the diarist of 15 Panzer made the following note:

Little was known of the enemy. The divisional commander assumed that the last engagements had been with rearguards while the main enemy forces retreated towards [Tobruk](#).

The diarist added that [Africa Corps](#) 'would attack this force, cut its route to [Tobruk](#), and destroy it', a programme more in line with Rommel's plan than Cruewell's, though this may have arisen in part from the corps commander's reiteration of Ed Duda as an intermediate objective without reference to [Sidi Rezegh](#). But Kriebel says that Neumann-Silkow 'knew of the steepness of the escarpment at [Sidi Rezegh](#)' and decided to pass south of there; also 15 Panzer intercepted orders from Panzer Group, he says, and modified its plans accordingly. But Cruewell was travelling as usual with the leading tanks of 15 Panzer and could easily have been consulted. His independent and sometimes argumentative attitude to orders from above was matched by Neumann-Silkow's, however, and the divisional commander determined to by-pass Rezegh and attack Ed Duda from the west. Panzer Group arranged for Boettcher Group to bring down supporting fire and for 90 Light to do likewise for 21 Panzer at [Belhamed](#), in the fanciful belief that these two objectives would be

attacked simultaneously.

Soon after 9 a.m. 15 Panzer moved off briskly through light shellfire which increased in weight as the New Zealand guns found its range, encouraging the vanguard to swing south of the southern escarpment. Though the British armour was some miles to the south, its guns also engaged the long German columns and British tanks harried the supply vehicles at the rear, causing much confusion

¹ And not with strict truth, for Cruewell's confirming order was not sent to 15 Pz Div, the formation chiefly affected, until 10.20 p.m.

² When Cruewell gave out his final instructions at 15 Pz Div HQ. Gen Balotta of Ariete was present and also Maj Suesskind-Schwendi, representing Gen von Ravenstein.

until 33 Anti-Tank Battalion took charge and drove them off. By 10.55 a.m. the leading elements of 15 Panzer suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves among friends, Boettcher Group at Bir Bu Creimisa.

Wireless interception had meanwhile introduced a fresh complication. Cruewell heard from Panzer Group that a 'Strong enemy force with tanks and artillery' was 'advancing east of Ed Duda towards [Sidi Rezegh](#)'. ¹ This was part of the British move to put 19 Battalion on the Rezegh escarpment (with the help of [Tobruk](#) tanks and the Australians) and it came to nothing; but Cruewell was not to know this and at 10.30 a.m. he signalled to Neumann-Silkow as follows:

Ravenstein is lagging behind badly. Stop south of Rezegh and detail a force to open up the pass down from the escarpment. ²

Assuming that 15 Panzer would obey this order, Cruewell signalled at 11.10 a.m. to General Suemmermann that 'Neumann is waiting at Rezegh' and 'Ravenstein is to move forward'. But Neumann-Silkow refused to be diverted and carried on past Boettcher Group towards Bir Salem, three miles west of Ed Duda, opening up a wide gap between the two panzer divisions, while 21 Panzer loitered as before. Its GOC, General von Ravenstein, had set out on an early-morning reconnaissance and had not returned. In his absence his GSO I, Major Suesskind-Schwendi, failed even to get

the division started on its westward advance.

Cruewell reached Bir Bu Creimisa before he realised that his order to take [Sidi Rezegh](#) had been disobeyed and there his attention was soon taken up by a rare gathering of senior officers. Rommel was there and with him the two Italian corps commanders, Gambarara and Navarrini, and General Franceschini of Pavia Division. Cruewell again pleaded the case for pushing the attack through to the [Tobruk](#) perimeter but Rommel would not hear of it. He had no wish to deal with a garrison even stronger than that which had been the bane of his existence since April, and he insisted on cutting off 'the enemy at [Belhamed](#) and Duda' from [Tobruk](#). As the [Africa Corps](#) diary puts it, 'an enormous pocket was to be formed in the [Belhamed](#)—Zafraan³—Bir Sciuerat⁴—southern escarpment— [Sidi Rezegh](#) area'. This implied a new task for Ariete, which would become the connecting link between the two panzer divisions and form part of the forces directly encircling the New Zealanders. To complete the encirclement 15 Panzer would have to break through the Ed Duda position and link up with 21 Panzer on the 'northern edge of

¹ DAK diary, Messages In.

² Messages Out.

³ A much mis-spelt place-name.

⁴ And this too.

[Belhamed](#)'. There was not even a remote chance, however, that 21 Panzer would keep this rendezvous and its commander was at that very moment the prize exhibit at New Zealand Divisional Headquarters, the first German general to be captured in the Second World War.

When von Ravenstein failed to return from his reconnaissance the divisional staff began to get upset. Not only was opposition ahead altogether too lively, but the Jock Columns of 30 Corps kept up troublesome 25-pounder fire from the east and south-east and Ariete, moving on westwards along the higher ground, left the

southern flank open. Appeals for help from Corps and 15 Panzer fell on deaf ears, and in the end Cruewell reconciled himself to the fact that 21 Panzer had no hope of reaching [Belhamed](#). Realising at last that it could do no more than block the eastern escape route of the New Zealanders, he instructed the division accordingly at 6.35 p.m.

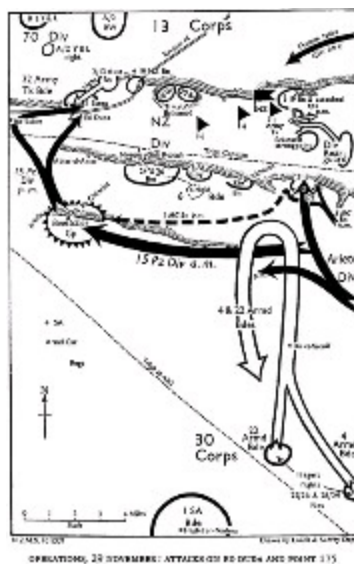
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The southern flank of the New Zealand Division was now in great danger, increased by expectation of the arrival of 1 South African Brigade, since this led observers in 6 Brigade to view movement to the south with hope rather than suspicion. When 25 Battalion reported at 7 a.m. on the 29th the approach from the east of a large column, there was some doubt about whether or not it was friendly until its course carried it westwards above the southern escarpment. Then it was identified as enemy 'escaping westwards' and shelled both by 6 Field Regiment and by guns of 30 Corps far to the south. There was no suspicion that this was practically the whole of [15 Panzer Division](#).

Since first light 21 Battalion had been busily disposing its two companies in trenches and sangars prepared by 361 Africa Regiment to defend the derelict-strewn slopes of Point 175. The CO, Major Fitzpatrick, set up his headquarters in a large bir which had evidently been used for the same purpose by the Germans. Captain Turtill's ¹ company extended in an arc from south to east with the dismounted carrier platoon carrying the line to the escarpment rim, while Captain Tongue's company faced south with an outpost on the Rugbet en-Nbeidat, 500–600 yards from the left of 25 Battalion. Seven 2-pounders of 65 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, added depth to the defences, and seven Valentines and one light tank of [8 Royal Tanks](#) lurked in two wadis ready to counter-attack above or below

¹ [Capt A. C. Turtill](#); born England, 7 Jul 1909; chiropractor; killed in action 29 Nov 1941.

the escarpment. Across the Trigh Capuzzo there were six field batteries which at various times gave support.



OPERATIONS, 29 NOVEMBER: ATTACKS ON ED DUDA AND POINT 175

Though the position was weak in infantry, it therefore had solid support and the men were in good heart. They soon had an excellent tonic, moreover, when a German general fell into their hands. The 'I' Section had been stationed on Turtill's left, and from it Second-Lieutenant [Money](#)¹ set out about 8.30 a.m. to find a good place for an OP. 'After walking for a few minutes we sighted a large car travelling WEST parallel with the escarpment', two privates in the party reported. 'Not able to recognise the occupants we lay "doggo" till it was within 200–300 yards of us. We then saw they were enemy so opened fire with our rifles. The car immediately halted and the three occupants ... dived into a hole. After firing a few more rounds we walked forward and took them prisoner.'² Other members of Turtill's company had given covering fire, including Private [Goad](#)³ and Turtill himself. Money says that when he got close enough he was 'thrilled and excited' to see the 'badges of rank' of one of his captives. 'Unconsciously I must have taken a firmer grip on my rifle', he adds, and the prisoner yelled, 'Nein! Nein! General! General!' But it took some time to discover that the prisoner was Major-General von Ravenstein. At 6 Brigade Headquarters he gave his name as Mueller and Barrowclough sent him on to [Divisional Headquarters](#), together with the many papers captured with him, some of them obviously important.

This was at five past ten, and at 11.15 a.m. [Divisional Headquarters](#) signalled back that 'there are two immediate threats' revealed by the captured documents: an attack from the east to 'drive us back on [TOBRUK](#)' and a panzer attack from [Gambut](#) 'sweeping down on [BELHAMED](#)' from the north. But the documents were not the

blessing they were deemed: Ravenstein had missed the early-morning conference with Cruewell and knew nothing of later modifications to Cruewell's plan to drive with both panzer divisions abreast straight through the New Zealand Division. The Ravenstein papers drew all eyes at [Divisional Headquarters](#) to the eastern flank in imminent expectation of the tremendous assault forecast in bold crayon lines on a captured map, though at that very time the major partner in this threatened enterprise, [15 Panzer Division](#), was already miles west of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and swinging round to attack Ed Duda. ⁴

Meanwhile the close-packed columns of [15 Panzer Division](#) attracted most of the gunners' attentions and an attack on 21 Battalion started up from the south-east in such inconspicuous fashion that its menace was not immediately apparent. A small

¹ [Capt J. H. Money; Auckland](#); born England, 17 Nov 1905; newspaper representative; wounded and p.w. 30 Nov 1941.

² [R. S. Nichol](#) and C. Vause.

³ [Pte G. H. Goad](#), DCM; born England, 28 Dec 1910; carpenter; died of wounds 26 Jun 1942.

⁴ See photographic copy of map following p. 358.

group of vehicles which emerged from the direction of [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#), near the captured MDS, about 10.30 a.m. carried 2 MG Battalion of 15 Panzer on a mission which was by some oversight a relic of Cruewell's original plan. This unit, under Captain Busch, had been ordered to push westwards along the escarpment, in the mistaken belief that by so doing it would maintain a link between the two panzer divisions. Busch knew (as Ravenstein evidently did not) that Point 175 was strongly held, and set off on foot with two companies leading, his headquarters back a little, a third company in reserve in vehicles on the right and the Motor Cycle MG Company on the left. An anti-tank troop with five or six guns followed the leading companies, but there was no field artillery.

In this tufted desert it was the vehicles which attracted most attention. While they advanced under light shellfire, the leading machine-gunners drew as close as they could to the FDLs before the defenders perceived what was afoot. Twenty-first Battalion opened fire with Brens and mortars, and the German heavy mortars and MMGs quickly replied. Some machine-gunners reached the shelter of derelict vehicles (including tanks) and directed heavy and accurate fire into the eastern end of Turtill's thinly-held position. This damage, however, was localised and with patience could easily have been overcome by the field artillery. But Majors Fitzpatrick and O'Neill agreed that the I tanks should make yet another unsupported sortie of the kind which had already caused [8 Royal Tanks](#) crippling loss. In it O'Neill met his death and most of the remaining tanks were lost.

The main body of the enemy was well over 500 yards away when O'Neill counter-attacked with four tanks of 3 Troop on the right, while Second-Lieutenant Sugden led the remaining three tanks on the left. The Valentines presented a formidable threat to the machine-gunners and for a few minutes it looked as though 3 Company of the German unit would be overwhelmed. Then the German anti-tank guns opened fire and all four of O'Neill's tanks were hit. 'Major O'Neill's tank came back out of action very fast with the turret on fire', Sugden wrote later: 'it is reported that the driver was pulled out by N.Z. infantry, but I am practically certain no one got out of the turret'. Sugden lost one tank to a Teller mine and was more careful with his remaining two, making two sorties and engaging the enemy each time from the crest of the escarpment until the anti-tank guns 'started to hit us' at about 700 yards' range, when the two Valentines withdrew. After the second sortie Sugden's tank was found to be hit through the radiator and from then onwards had to be towed. ¹

¹ G. H. Sugden, report in the war diary of 8 R Tks, 9 Dec 1941.

The Germans then pushed on through 'violent' defensive fire to seize the easternmost of Turtill's posts and take 'about 30' prisoners. ¹ This was a copybook example of 'fire and movement', in the course of which overwhelming MG fire was concentrated at the point of attack. But it was almost the limit of Captain Busch's success. To overcome heavy opposition on his left (from Captain Tongue's company) he committed 1 Company, which was soon forced to dismount when its vehicles

were swept with fire. The reinforcements nevertheless pressed on and pushed back some of Tongue's posts, the remaining Valentine got ready to counter-attack, and the whole front was ablaze when Busch received orders to break off at once and follow 15 Panzer westwards. Like 33 Panzer Engineers at [Capuzzo](#) he pointed out that he would lose more men by pulling out than by carrying on; but Colonel Geissler of 200 Regiment insisted and 2 MG Battalion disengaged bit by bit 'under terrific fire all the time'.² The action had cost Busch 7 killed, 67 wounded and 17 missing; but there is no record of the losses of 21 Battalion, other than the estimate of thirty taken prisoner. Two whole gun teams of 259 Anti-Tank Battery, RA, had been killed or wounded, however, and the battery commander, Major R. P. H. Mackenzie, was shot dead while 'carrying in wounded'.

By mid-afternoon men of 21 Battalion were able once more to move freely about their positions. Then the three Vickers guns which had done much to hold off the final attack were moved back to the edge of the escarpment so as to cover the Trigh Capuzzo. They were soon engaging 'with good effect', Fitzpatrick says, 'the enemy column ... on the flat below us'— 21 Panzer pushing towards [Zaafraan](#). More trouble was indeed brewing for 21 Battalion, but not from that direction.

At the other end of the long 6 Brigade position the morning also brought good news. Carriers found the enemy had departed from the ground overrun the previous afternoon,³ and patrols went out from C Company of the 24th to pick up wounded and recover weapons, ammunition and other gear left on the ground. The chief trouble now was the thinness of the troops on the ground. The two remaining companies of the 24th numbered a little over 100 (with three officers) and the 26th could muster perhaps 260 (with ten officers), not nearly enough to defend the whole of the escarpment west of Point 162. Most positions were on flat, rocky ground, with no cover for anti-tank guns or other supporting weapons, and in plain view of enemy on the southern escarpment.

¹ Report by 2 MG Bn on action 29 Nov, appended to 15 Pz Div diary.

² Ibid. Three MMGs of 7 PI, 3 MG Coy, had arrived (on Barrowclough's orders) from 24 Bn in the early afternoon and added to the volume of defensive fire.

³ Barrowclough thought this 'an extraordinary event' when he heard of it at 10.10 a.m.

Until 8.30 a.m. there were lingering doubts as to whether or not the troops seen in the Bir Bu Creimisa area were friendly; but the landing of an enemy transport aircraft there at that time settled this issue. Then came news of the impending arrival of the South Africans, with its consequent train of false hopes and disillusionments. The march of 15 Panzer was watched with great interest, seldom tinged with apprehension, by Shuttleworth's group, by 8 Field Company occupying some 1000 yards of the escarpment north of the airfield, and by 25 Battalion holding 1500 yards on both sides of the Blockhouse, as well as by 21 Battalion during lulls in its contest with 2 MG Battalion. At 10.08 a.m. 25 Battalion reported a large column of unidentified lorries and tanks moving west and the Intelligence Officer noted that these were 'Probably enemy who have made a break from NORTH for [EL ADEM](#)'.

The field guns, their ammunition replenished by Clifton's convoy and the consignment from [Tobruk](#), had their busiest day so far, and 6 Field Regiment was seldom idle for more than a few minutes. The only limiting factor was the uncertainty in identifying the various groups observed. ¹ The batteries generally covered their own zones, 29 and 30 the gap between Rezegh and Ed Duda reaching as far as Bir Bu Creimisa, 47 Battery the southern front, and 48 the south-eastern and eastern, but they were linked on occasions to thicken up fire on important targets, chiefly in the neighbourhood of Point 175. Three such concentrations were fired with some success on a hostile battery 'located on scanty information' in the unnamed wadi just east of this point, and a fourth was directed at 'a hostile concentration' ² in [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#). Some of this fire, by an unhappy hazard of war, fell within the captured New Zealand MDS. The 29th Battery engaged two large-calibre guns observed on the southern escarpment to good effect, but to balance the account 48 Battery received heavy and accurate counter-battery fire.

At about 12.40 p.m. the supply column escort ventured into noman's land to the south on its way back to 4 Armoured Brigade, carrying with it the unjustified hopes of Brigade Headquarters and 25 Battalion (through which it passed) that it would help to 'destroy some enemy convoys to the south east'. ³ Then there was a

distraction in the west. 'Tank battle observed ED DUDA', 24 Battalion reported at 1.50 p.m.: '30 Tanks'.⁴ This was premature, and when 4 Brigade saw 8 Panzer Regiment disappearing towards Bir Salem it concluded

¹ The British armour thought 15 Panzer was massing at [Sidi Rezegh](#) to attack northwards when it was actually on its way to Ed Duda. New Zealand counter-battery fire was almost certainly directed at British guns shelling 6 Bde by mistake in the early afternoon. See p. 408.

² Weir, op. cit.

³ Burton.

⁴ 6 Bde Log Diary.

that the tanks attacking Ed Duda had been driven off, an opinion duly relayed to 6 Brigade. Then at 4.45 p.m. 26 Battalion saw a 'terrific battle going on' to the south-west; 'Two Big German guns on wheels ... firing furiously into battle'.¹ The two guns were engaged by 6 Field Regiment, but though a 'Terrific battle din from DUDA' was heard at 5 p.m., its meaning was not at all clear.

Everything depended, in Barrowclough's view, on getting the South Africans up to help hold his over-stretched line and thicken the defences against armoured counter-attack. His position was otherwise untenable. There was nothing to suggest that Pienaar might have serious trouble in getting forward. When at 3.15 p.m. a solitary armoured car came through the lines of the 25th bearing Lieutenant Bayley 'to announce arrival of 1 SA Bde',² it seemed that Barrowclough's troubles were practically over. All that remained was to identify among the various groups seen from time to time in the south the particular vehicles that were carrying the Springboks. The South African brigade would be easily recognisable, it was thought, by its 'particular type of vehicles' and by the armoured cars which would precede it.

In the light of what was actually happening in the south this was a recipe for trouble; but in mid-afternoon there was a deceptive lull. A report came through that the tank attack on Ed Duda had been driven off, the attack on Point 175 had died

down and the enemy there was decamping, and throughout 6 Brigade there was only intermittent shellfire to contend with.

Lieutenant Sugden of 8 Royal Tanks suggested that the two remaining Valentines (one of them on tow) with 21 Battalion should withdraw to their headquarters on the flat below and Major Fitzpatrick readily agreed. Off they went, and Fitzpatrick inspected Captain Tongue's company and moved over to Lieutenant Dutton's,³ where rum was being issued from a supply taken from von Ravenstein's car. A message then came from the carrier officer that a column of vehicles was approaching and that Brigade Headquarters, told by telephone, had replied that this was probably the South Africans 'we had been expecting all day'.⁴ Fitzpatrick therefore sent out a carrier patrol and in the meantime did his best with those around him to make out whether the leading vehicles were the armoured cars of which he had been told. He could not be sure, but they had 'high turrets like M.H.s [Marmon-Herringtons]', and these were open and 'the crews sitting on top had on berets'.⁵ Then

¹ 6 Bde Log Diary.

² Ibid.

³ Capt Turtill had been killed in the attack by 2 MG Bn and Dutton took over his company.

⁴ Fitzpatrick, report.

⁵ Ibid.

he saw Dutton walking out towards the newcomers, followed by some of his men waving their helmets on top of their rifles in a gesture of welcome. The artillery FOO alongside Fitzpatrick, however, was sceptical and gave his guns directions to lay on the approaching column, though not to fire.

Relief changed to horror and dismay when Fitzpatrick saw Dutton and the

leading infantry among the vehicles, now identified as tanks, and under fire from them. The brigade Log Diary has the following terse entry for 5.10 p.m.:

21 Bn. Bn Comd sends urgent message for Arty support. 'They are into my lines with three tanks and are taking prisoners. Arty support at once for Gods sake.'

Two Italian tanks were quickly disabled by portées of 259 Anti-Tank Battery, skilfully firing over the heads of the New Zealand infantry; but other enemy tanks were obscured by their prisoners. Brigade asked Lieutenant-Colonel Weir to help, but it was already too late for the field guns to reverse the situation. Many of Dutton's men had gone forward and were caught in the open, the tanks opened fire, and the Italian infantry (for it was part of Ariete) debussed and were soon among them and disarming them. Some of Tongue's sections slipped down the escarpment to safety; but most were quickly rounded up by 'flying columns of Italians with LMGs'.¹ Fitzpatrick got back as fast as he could to his headquarters, sent his 'H.Q. personnel' to the 'bottom of the wadi', and burnt important papers and erased map markings. When the tanks were no more than 60 yards away he asked Brigade for orders and was told to 'do the sensible thing'. So he joined the others below and made off along the foot of the escarpment. He then met the acting commander of 259 Anti-Tank Battery, who was going back to see if he could retrieve the rest of his guns. Fitzpatrick told him it was 'useless to go for them' and the anti-tank party turned round and accompanied Fitzpatrick's, stopping every now and then to engage Italian tanks on the crest. Near Brigade Headquarters Fitzpatrick came upon some field guns which were by this time engaging Ariete on Point 175 in the gathering gloom.

Various other parties also got back safely to Brigade Headquarters, including one consisting of wounded, a carrying party of about a dozen German prisoners (from 2 MG Battalion), and an escort. After a hot meal the survivors were allotted places in a new position near the Trigh Capuzzo facing Point 175, where they had to dig in on rocky ground. Twenty-first Battalion now numbered 5 officers and 179 other ranks,² some 140 having been taken prisoner. Losses

¹ Fitzpatrick.

² According to the unit diary – a high estimate.

in the supporting arms were also heavy. Only a sergeant and six drivers of 7 MG Platoon survived unharmed; at least three complete tank crews of 8 Royal Tanks were lost; and 259 Battery had 10 killed or missing and 8 wounded in the day's fighting.

Once again the enemy held the much-contested Point 175 and in the morning would undoubtedly exploit the splendid observation it gave over much of the Divisional area. Many stories were told of how this disaster came about, and some survivors, not recognising their assailants, attributed to the Germans a deliberate and disarming pretence of friendliness towards 21 Battalion. But the truth was that the vanguard of Ariete, like Ravenstein earlier, thought the Germans held Point 175 and was as much surprised as the New Zealanders when it realised its mistake.

To Barrowclough the news was bad indeed and he looked for relief from the only source he knew: 1 South African Brigade. His efforts, however, had the opposite to the desired effect. On Freyberg's orders Brigadier Pienaar had agreed to make a night march to 175 to 'link up ... with N Z holding that point', starting at 7 p.m. When he received Barrowclough's message after 6 p.m. that Point 175 was lost he changed his mind. At 6.50 he reported to 30 Corps that the move was cancelled for the night 'as door reported open was subsequently closed'.¹ He halted his vanguard and the South African brigade bedded down.

iii

On the eastern flank of the Division the main weight of the fighting below the escarpment on the 29th was borne by 8 Field Regiment, RA, (less V/AA Battery) under Lieutenant-Colonel Walton, by 8 Royal Tanks, and by four recaptured Stuarts manned by ad hoc crews from C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, as well as by some of the old Mark VIBs. These tanks struck soon after dawn and to better effect than they realised. The German infantry retreated in 'wild disorder' (according to 5 Panzer Regiment) until the twelve remaining German tanks and the anti-tank guns intervened, knocking out two New Zealand tanks and no fewer than ten tanks of 8 Royal Tanks.

The two small battle groups of 21 Panzer nevertheless suffered a severe setback

which considerably delayed the assembly for the main attack, though Walton's rearguard endured a blistering bombardment by the German guns. The German infantry came on again in mid-morning, backed by tanks, and the remaining Valentines and light tanks of [8 Royal Tanks](#) carried on in gallant opposition until all were lost. Then the nine remaining Matildas of [44 Royal Tanks](#)

¹ 1 SA Bde report.

stepped into the breach and fought a sound delaying action, withdrawing with the guns to the Divisional area by 1 p.m. without further loss. Thus concluded a rearguard action which was extravagantly expensive in tanks.

The eastern flank of the Division then stretched from Point 175 to [Zaafran](#). Its defences were in the nature of a patchwork quilt, but they could be backed if necessary by the full Divisional Artillery and were more than a match for anything Colonel Knabe, temporarily commanding 21 Panzer, could set against them. The Ravenstein papers suggested otherwise, however, and encouraged [Divisional Headquarters](#) and 4 Brigade to pay undue attention to this flank.

The defences between [Zaafran](#) and the Trigh Capuzzo had been taking shape since the previous evening, when [Brigadier Inglis](#) decided to form a strongpoint in the area of [Bir Sciuearat](#), a mile and a half due north of Point 175. This covered [Divisional Headquarters](#) in its new location and eventually formed one of the links in a loose chain stretching southwards from about halfway between [Ed Dbana](#) and [Zaafran](#). The core of the strongpoint was 26 Field Battery, facing east and south, which was joined in the afternoon by Major Cochran's composite force of South Africans plus 6 Field Company, and by 4 Platoon of 2 MG Company under Lieutenant [Lee](#). ¹ 'Zaaforce' of 19 Battalion under Colonel Hartnell at [Zaafran](#) took over 5 Field Park Company and a detachment from Brigade headquarters, with 260 Anti-Tank Battery (five guns) and D Troop of 31 Anti-Tank Battery.

[Brigadier Inglis](#) now recommended that [Divisional Headquarters](#) should follow Corps Headquarters into [Tobruk](#) and clear the ground of the many non-fighting vehicles which hampered the defence. This was similar to Barrowclough's proposal; and [Freyberg](#) rejected it for the same reasons. He had been ordered to keep open

the Corridor and felt that 'only chance of holding [Sidi Rezegh](#) and [Belhamed](#) depended on co-ordination of plans with SA Bde Gp'. ² [Inglis](#) had been listening-in on the 'Bayley to Bayley' link between [Freyberg](#)'s and Pienaar's headquarters and was sceptical. He doubted if the South African brigade would arrive and pointed out that 'it was a damned draughty corridor with nothing to go through it anyway'. Sounds of fighting at Ed Duda gave rise to speculation; but there was nothing to suggest that 15 Panzer had reached that area and [Freyberg](#) was still expecting this division to appear in the east in accordance with the captured plans. Yet the first heavy blow of the counter-attack had already fallen, not on the New Zealand Division but on the [Tobruk](#) garrison.

¹ [Lt G. L. Lee](#), MC; born England, 2 Feb 1908; farmer; died of wounds 2 Jan 1942.

² GOC's diary.

iv

There was still some hope that the [Tobruk](#) garrison might be able to take some of the weight off [Freyberg](#)'s shoulders and Brigadier Harding had flown again to [Tobruk](#) on the 28th for further discussions with General Scobie. They both agreed that the next stage of operations would be defensive, but no material benefit accrued other than the welcome supply column of forty-two lorries from [Tobruk](#). The proposals Scobie and Harding made to tighten up the defences of the Corridor, signalled at 10.30 p.m. on the 28th to General Godwin-Austen and duly approved by him, did not go very far and proved in the end fruitless. Scobie was ready to cover the gap between Ed Duda and [Sidi Rezegh](#); but the complete redistribution of his troops which this would have entailed if attempted on an adequate scale was far from his thoughts. He also prepared to send the remaining half of 19 Battalion to reinforce [Sidi Rezegh](#), the western part of which he understood to be in enemy hands; but the enemy there had withdrawn in the night and this plan was therefore cancelled, though it brought 2/13 Australian Battalion into the picture at Ed Duda as a useful reserve.

German tanks were seen approaching Ed Duda from the west at 1 p.m. and lorried infantry from the south. After a brief delay 1 RHA and then a battery of 104 RHA engaged the enemy, but the rest of the garrison artillery was too far away. The four batteries of 6 Field Regiment could have thickened up the defensive fire very considerably had the groundwork for such co-operation been laid in the past two days; but 1 Essex had to do without this help. Even the I tanks at Ed Duda did not seem to the infantry to be doing much, and B Company of 1 Essex soon found itself facing fifteen German tanks about 300 yards to the west. A and D Companies watched a brief duel at 900 yards' range between an anti-tank troop and thirty tanks to the south which the tanks won. The next phase was a systematic destruction by the tanks of the rocky sangars of 1 Essex, an ominous development which Brigadier Willison at once reported to Scobie, asking if 7 Armoured Division could do anything to help. Scobie could give no assurance of this and told him Ed Duda must be held at all costs. A few I tanks ventured forward, several of them were hit, the rest drew back to hull-down positions in the rear, and from then onwards 1 Essex felt very much alone.

The attack on Ed Duda might have been even heavier; but it was carried out with breathless haste which robbed 8 Panzer Regiment of much support. A boggy stretch of ground below Bir Bu Creimisa held up most of II Battalion of 115 Infantry Regiment and many of the supporting guns. Only three companies of infantry therefore took part in the final assault. This was nevertheless successful as far as it went and the tanks and infantry collected 150 prisoners. Only two companies of 1 Essex, however, were overrun and the Germans halted short of the rest of that unit. The three companies of 115 Regiment, some 300 men all told, split into two battle groups, one on each side of the By-pass road, and dug in at once. It was after 5 p.m. and already too late to carry the attack through to [Belhamed](#).

At about this time Brigadier Willison ordered 2/13 Australian Battalion to counter-attack; but there was no sense in doing so in daylight against enemy tanks and the move was deferred until after dark. In 1 Essex, C Company, most of D, and a few of A and B Companies were still holding out. The German tanks were so near D Company that the men scarcely dared breathe; but the enemy seemed more interested in the ground to the north, where I tanks could be glimpsed from time to time. Four Matildas lay just behind C Company, excellently placed if the enemy came

on but unable to engage the German tanks from where they were. Nor could they advance without offering the enemy easy targets.

When the light began to fail, some of the British tanks edged forward and the air was filled with tracers as the enemy engaged them. The Pzkw IIs came into their own in this twilight clash and their 20-millimetre automatic cannon blazed in deadly fashion at the Matildas, knocking out two of them. The Matildas in the end gave ground and the panzers followed them slowly, ending up in brilliant moonlight at 6.35 p.m. on the edge of the Australian position. German infantry also spread out and some began digging in 200 yards from the headquarters of 1 Essex. To Colonel Nichols the position looked desperate.

Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows of the Australian battalion prepared to counter-attack; but the moonlight was too bright, the German tanks still very much in evidence, and he decided to hold his hand until the moon was lower. His B Company on the right and C on the left formed up on either side of Nichols's headquarters, A Company covered 1 RHA, whose gun positions were now very close to the German tanks, and D stayed in reserve 'along the western approaches to Ed Duda'.

Then the Australian B Company suffered a tragic blow. As it moved forward a heavy shell landed directly on 10 Platoon, killing eight and wounding ten of its total of twenty-six men. The other two platoons, 'displaying exemplary battle discipline, moved past the stricken platoon, disregarding the pathetic cries of the wounded and the dying'.¹ The stretcher bearers were soon on the scene and the gap in the Australian ranks was filled when a platoon of A Company and the remnants of B Company of 1 Essex spontaneously lined up to join the attack. Nichols and Burrows had meanwhile

¹ Bayonets Abroad, p. 150.

called for tank support, and as the moon was waning eleven tanks came forward, all that was left of 4 Royal Tanks. These lined up astride the By-pass road 'with only a foot between the horns of each tank' and Willison inspected them there.

1

When the I tanks counter-attacked, late at night, they ran all through the

German lines, creating panic. Then the Australians fell with great vigour upon the two bewildered battle groups of 115 Regiment, 'slew an undetermined number',² and took 167 prisoners, at a cost of only two killed and five wounded Australians. Mopping-up continued for the rest of the night and many small parties of enemy wandered in by mistake and were taken prisoner. The two Australian companies reorganised with the remainder of 1 Essex as a composite battalion under Colonel Nichols, occupying much the same ground as was originally defended.

On the enemy side six officers and about fifty other ranks, the remnants of those elements of 115 Regiment which took part in the action, fell back 1000 yards to the west and formed a new position alongside 15 Motor Cycle Battalion. This unit of 200 Regiment had been brought forward to continue the attack through to [Belhamed](#) next day with 8 Panzer Regiment. A second attack on Ed Duda was briefly considered, but there were too few German infantry at hand to undertake it. Then Panzer Group, signalling to 33 Reconnaissance Unit to come under its command and report at once to [El Adem](#), used by mistake the call sign of 15 Panzer, which therefore withdrew at once and reached Bir Salem before the mistake was discovered.³ Thus the whole division was back where it started and the attack on Ed Duda gained nothing. Like the first attack on [Capuzzo](#), it exposed weaknesses in the defence which were soon remedied so that any further attack would be harder still.

There was some talk at Panzer Group Headquarters of closing the gap between 15 Panzer and 90 Light by artillery fire, but in an appreciation of 10.30 p.m. on the 29th Cruewell stated without beating about the bush that 'The enemy at [Belhamed](#) and [Zafraan](#)⁴ was not surrounded' and 'His contact with [Tobruk](#) had not been severed'. Cruewell therefore decided that the 'tasks of the divisions for 30 Nov remained the same as for 29 Nov.' He did not hear of the British counter-attack at Ed Duda, however, until 3.25 a.m. on the 30th, and it was not until 6.30 a.m. that he was told the bad

¹ An unscheduled inspection was also carried out by a patrol of 18 Bn from [Belhamed](#), which duly reported back that 50 tanks and 1000 infantry were ready to counter-attack the enemy facing 4 Bde, a story which persisted and had a bad influence later (See p. 424).

² Bayonets Abroad, p. 152.

³ The signal came from Gen Gause, who wanted 33 Recce Unit to operate with de Meo Recce Gp under the command of [Trieste](#) on the southern flank, ready to exploit any weakening of the pressure by the British armour in that area.

⁴ Sic.

news that 15 Panzer was back at [El Adem](#). Panzer Group identified a fresh British rifle brigade with 100 tanks to the south and was puzzled that this force (actually the two armoured brigades plus 1 South African Brigade) did so little. In an intelligence report to [Berlin](#) Panzer Group attributed this charitably to supply difficulties. The British Jock Columns harassing the rear of 21 Panzer were thought to be about equal in strength to the force in the south, which was anything but flattering to the latter—the main strength of 30 Corps.

▼

On this day, the 29th, the main German striking force, 15 Panzer, was able to travel 20 miles westwards from Bir Sciafsciuf, tuck itself in behind Boettcher Group at Bir Bu Creimisa, and then attack Ed Duda without any effective intervention by the British armour. Ariete, too, moved up and seized Point 175 simultaneously with the attack on Ed Duda and under the very noses of the British armoured brigades, also without hindrance by them. While these grave threats to 13 Corps were developing the British armour was curiously passive, and a member of [3 Royal Tanks](#), who saw no enemy this day and fired no shot, has recorded his impression that the British command meant to 'give us a bit of a break' at this stage, with the result that 4 Armoured Brigade was 'uncommitted to any decisive action for a considerable time.'

1

Thus the two armoured brigades with at least eighty-four tanks between them and the South African brigade had even less influence on the battle than the Jock Columns. Early in the morning the armoured brigades took over two of the South African field batteries and 7 Medium Regiment, RA, was used for long-range fire

against Ariete and Boettcher Group, leaving Pienaar very few guns to protect his brigade. General Ritchie signalled his approval of the policy of dispersion by ordering General Norrie to continue the 'excellent work with "Jock" columns' and to direct 'armoured cars to harass enemy supply columns'. He also wanted Pienaar to 'join up with N.Z. Div. as soon as the situation permitted', ² thought this would not come about without firm orders. The British tanks still showed no inclination to clear the route and Pienaar could not move under threat of tank attack without strong artillery. Norrie had a vague hope, when he heard late in the morning that Clifton's supply column had got through under cover of darkness, that a fighting formation could somehow do the same in daylight; but the situation called for something more than vague hopes.

¹ Crisp, p. 143.

² Richie, Eighth Army Report, Sec. 57.

General Gott signalled to Brigadier Gatehouse before 8 a.m. telling him to keep open (not to open up) the way to the New Zealanders and to 'Follow 1 S.A. Bde and keep a look out.' ¹ How the armour was to keep open a road by following the traffic which used it is hard to understand; but the question soon became academic. All the armoured brigades did was to deploy again in the [Sidi Muftah](#) area, four miles north of their night laager, and spend the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon shelling likely-looking targets. They first managed to cause alarm among the supply echelons of 15 Panzer as these drove westwards, though they failed to identify them as such despite accurate reports from 4 South African Armoured Car Regiment. Another westward movement, probably of Ariete, then engaged Brigadier Gatehouse's attention and he withdrew his leading elements and formed up facing mainly eastwards, allowing part of Ariete to slip past to the north. There followed two or three hours of comparative inaction and then 4 Armoured Brigade set off once again northwards, only to halt after a short distance while [2 Royal Horse Artillery](#), covered by 5 Royal Tanks, shelled 6 New Zealand Brigade at [Sidi Rezegh](#) in the belief that enemy tanks were assembling there. An hour later 4 Armoured Brigade

Headquarters learned that the airfield was 'clear' and the guns ceased fire. By this time—about 1.30 p.m.—Gatehouse received orders to take up a position facing north along the 400 grid (running just south of the southern escarpment) from which he could counter-attack 'any threat on our own Tps on the NORTH side of the aerodrome'.² The attack by 2 MG Battalion on 21 Battalion was then in full swing, 4 Armoured Brigade was admirably placed to intervene decisively. and when Gatehouse reached the appointed grid line he was ordered to do so. He had 22 Armoured Brigade on his right and there was nothing to stop him driving straight on to Point 175. But at the last moment 5 Royal Tanks reported a large column about two miles to the west and sent out a patrol to investigate it before moving on, while the whole brigade waited. Some 40 to 50 enemy tanks were believed to be advancing on the left flank, supported by 88- and 105-millimetre guns; but 'dust and sun'³ obscured the view and exaggerated the menace. For the rest of the afternoon 5 Royal Tanks fought an action of sorts against this enemy—probably part of Ariete—while the rest of 4 Armoured Brigade and the whole of 22 Armoured Brigade awaited the outcome. Each side lost one tank.⁴

¹ As intercepted by the Germans.

² 4 Armd Bde war diary.

³ 5 R Tks war diary.

⁴ Ibid.

While this was happening the German 2 MG Battalion moved westwards to rejoin 15 Panzer, driving without trouble past the British armour, and Ariete recaptured Point 175. General Gott had been ordered to 'do everything possible to prevent'¹ an attack on the New Zealand Division as well as to 'destroy the enemy armour'. This day Ariete was most vulnerable, being short of ammunition and other supplies; but it was able to carry out its operations with very little interference by the British armour. At dusk the armoured brigades drew southwards to their previous night laager. Neither Ritchie nor Norrie read bad omens in the situation, chiefly

because wireless interception provided faulty insights into the enemy's situation. Norrie learned that both panzer divisions were 'asking for assistance' and the 21st found things 'intolerable' because of artillery fire from the Jock Columns,² while Ritchie concluded that it had 'become a matter of life and death for the enemy to drive us from the positions astride his communications with the west.'³ Neither had any idea that Rommel's current object was to encircle and destroy the New Zealand Division.

Rommel's forces were not strong enough to pursue this aim with advantage if Eighth Army concentrated to prevent him. He hoped to form a Kessel⁴ encompassing the whole of [Freyberg's](#) force and some of Scobie's into which he would throw a concoction of shell, mortar and MG fire so that dust and smoke rose from the witches' brew like an evil steam. Then, when he judged that the contents were ready, he would thrust in his panzer force like a gigantic ladle to empty the Kessel. But this was highly fanciful. The circumference of the cauldron would be 30 miles long, passing round Ed Duda, [Belhamed](#), [Zaafran](#) and the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment. Along this he had to stretch his dwindling forces as best he could—part of Ariete in the south, the shaky remnants of 21 Panzer in the east extending round (with some slight help from 90 Light) to [Belhamed](#), and 15 Panzer linking up the two through Ed Duda. The Kessel would at best be leaky and its thin walls in constant danger of collapse. A determined blow from the outside would demolish it once and for all, and with it Rommel's pretensions.

Yet Rommel's fancy was backed by his iron determination and encouraged by the inability of his opponents to act in close co-operation to pursue any aim at all. The main thought at 30 Corps and Army was to get Pienaar's brigade inside the Kessel,⁵ where with its strong artillery and its three intact infantry battalions it

¹ Ritchie, Eighth Army Report.

² 'Narrative of Events'.

³ Eighth Army Report.

⁴ Cauldron, though it could mean a basin-like hollow in the ground.

⁵ Pienaar understood he was to 'help to stop the enemy moving Westward'.

would undoubtedly have been a great boon to [Freyberg](#). But the first thing to do was to overcome the panzer threat. Orders to the armoured brigades wavered between protecting the New Zealanders, covering the South African advance, and destroying the enemy armour. Pienaar's orders remained unchanged until the late afternoon. He was to get in touch with the New Zealand Division as soon as possible, but first his reconnaissance troops must get through and he must not lose contact with the two armoured brigades; otherwise he was not to move from his position south of [Sidi Muftah](#). When he reached [Freyberg](#) he was to come under his command.

This was as ordered by Norrie at 6 a.m. on the 29th and received by Pienaar at 8.50. Since the preconditions were not fulfilled he made no move in the morning. Early in the afternoon his reconnaissance troops reported a 'large formation of Italian tanks to the NE of us'; ¹ but with further encouragement from Norrie and 'orders' from [Freyberg](#) he nevertheless decided to move if 22 Armoured Brigade could promise protection. This Brigadier Scott-Cockburn could not in the first instance do, being tied to the flank of 4 Armoured. At 4.40 p.m. he told Pienaar to wait an hour and then refer back to him.

Lieutenant Bayley of 3 South African Reconnaissance Battalion had meanwhile got through to the New Zealand Division with one out of three armoured cars which set out and an invaluable wireless link. [Freyberg](#), thinking Pienaar was already under his command, promptly ordered him to move up to Point 175. This was the message:

Will you come with all speed under adv guard AFV protecting yourself East flank with arty of all classes to point 175 Operate with confidence against these people. If you do you will get on top of coln moving East to West trying to escape on escarpment. They are Germans—force of troops in motor lorries and few AFV. Repeat take normal precautions for your front and flanks. Troops at 175 and to East

[West?] at SIDI RESEGH. Shoot at these lorries East to West. Use Armd Cs right to East. ²

This was reasonable enough, except that it viewed the enemy as an 'escaping prey'; but it was a task for armour rather than infantry. That 2 MG Battalion was trying to escape fitted the facts as [Freyberg](#) knew them and he knew little of what was going on farther south. But Pienaar had first-hand accounts of the meanderings of Ariete and every reason to be sceptical about help from the British armour. He nevertheless decided to move and at '1663 hours'—5.03 p.m.—the 'Bayley to Bayley' link passed the following to [Freyberg](#):

¹ 1 SA Bde report.

² As intercepted by 4 NZ Bde.

Am despatching strong forces forthwith to rendezvous moving remainder tonight. Is that right? ¹

At 4.50 p.m. Norrie had again urged Pienaar to move, but to the southern escarpment, not to Point 175. He, too, spoke of an escaping enemy and not of a crisis in the New Zealand Division. But Pienaar nevertheless decided to make for 175 and set the starting time at 7 p.m. Then he received Barrowclough's message that Point 175 was lost. At 6.25 he was told he was under [Freyberg](#)'s command and that Ritchie was 'most anxious that you should join [Bernard \[Freyberg\]](#) tonight'. ² [Freyberg](#) through Bayley assured him just after 6 p.m. that as far as could be ascertained 'point referred to is held by three enemy tanks and some MT' ³ and told Pienaar at 6.14 p.m. to notify [Divisional Headquarters](#) when he reached 175: 'we will then send up instructions'. This scarcely flattered an enemy who had overcome 21 Battalion and attached I tanks and Pienaar was not drawn by it. At 7.06 p.m. [Freyberg](#) ordered him to 'push on at once a column adequate to capture and hold 175' and to 'Report when you are in possession of that feature'. ⁴ This was demanding much; for Pienaar knew even less than [Freyberg](#) what strength was required to recapture the position and in the darkness had no way of finding out, so he waited until morning.

This was the end of the Bayley to Bayley link until after dawn on the 30th, and so Pienaar failed to explain 'why such a move was not feasible until first light'. He did, however, get another optimistic message from Ritchie through 30 Corps at 8.30 p.m. that the 'Huns and Macaronis' were 'squealing for help', that 21 Panzer found its situation 'unberable' and that Eighth Army should 'stick to them like hell'. Ariete was indeed short of ammunition and supplies and 21 Panzer was sandwiched uncomfortably between the New Zealand and Jock Column guns; but an infantry brigade was not the force to tackle enemy armour.

Ritchie spoke to Gott in the same vein and with even more emphasis. He was certain 21 Panzer and Ariete were trying to get away and told Gott to 'Stick to them tonight'. Gott was to do all he could to cut the L of C of the enemy armour and to use the South African armoured cars to 'chivy' the supply echelons of 15 Panzer. But no words of Ritchie's could change the time-honoured cavalry custom of withdrawing from the battlefield at dusk, and the armoured brigades continued their leisurely journey southwards. Gott was unimpressed with other messages suggesting some sort of crisis, though both he and his superiors knew that Ed Duda had been heavily attacked. Further details of this attack which trickled through during the night, however, introduced an element of alarm at Army Headquarters.

¹ 4 Bde war diary.

² 1 SA Bde report.

³ 4 Bde war diary.

⁴ 6 Bde war diary.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 23 – SIDI REZEGH IS LOST

CHAPTER 23

Sidi Rezegh is Lost

i

THE assault on Ed Duda gave the New Zealand Division a day's reprieve from attack by 15 Panzer; but the failure of this assault made the isolation and destruction of the New Zealand Division a matter of the utmost urgency. From the Axis viewpoint the passivity of 30 Corps in the past two days was too good to last. Panzer Group Headquarters thought the British armour was held up by lack of supplies and was certain it would soon resume the offensive on a grand scale. An early-morning aerial reconnaissance on the 30th seemed to confirm this opinion. When British tanks started moving towards the German strongpoint at Bir Bu Creimisa, defended by what was now called Mickl Group, ¹ General Rommel warned 15 Panzer and Trieste to be ready to help Colonel Mickl or Ariete Division. He nevertheless hoped that he would somehow be able to hold off the British armour long enough to cut through the Corridor, complete the ring around the New Zealand Division, and then close in on all sides to destroy it. For this purpose he placed Mickl Group under Cruewell's command with orders to seize the Sidi Rezegh escarpment, a task in which 15 Panzer would join if not needed against the British armour.

The consternation which followed the discovery at Panzer Group Headquarters that 15 Panzer had withdrawn from Ed Duda was followed by a decision to leave this position outside the Kessel and cut the Corridor instead between Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed. This task accorded better with the diminished strength of Africa Corps and the dwindling margin of time before 30 Corps was expected to attack again in full strength. But the British armoured thrust towards Bir Bu Creimisa evidently 'suffered from the lack of a strong unified leadership' ² and made no headway. Rommel could therefore direct almost all his attention to the battle of annihilation in the Kessel.

¹ Formerly Boettcher Gp. Boettcher was now in command of 21 Pz Div.

² Battle Report of Pz Army Africa, 18 Nov to 24 Dec 1941 (Union War Histories Translation No. 6a).

Ariete was to push westwards along the escarpment from Point 175 to link up with Mickl Group at [Sidi Rezegh](#), though it was having trouble from the British armour to the south and the Jock Columns to the south-east and was in urgent need of petrol and ammunition. If its situation got much worse 15 Panzer was to counter-attack to clear its flank and rear; if not, Neumann-Silkow was to attack straight through from Bir Bu Creimisa to [Belhamed](#) in conjunction with the attack by Mickl Group on [Sidi Rezegh](#). Five tanks would be detached to help Mickl.

This was the plan at the start, but it was soon modified. At Neumann-Silkow's headquarters there was some doubt whether 'the destruction of [2 New Zealand Division](#) was still possible'; ¹ but Rommel would hear of nothing else. As 15 Panzer made its way from Bir Salem to Bir Bu Creimisa the [Tobruk](#) artillery was extremely active and forced it to take a long detour, so that it was 1 p.m. before the division assembled. Then the [RAF](#) appeared and caused further trouble. Meanwhile Mickl was doing his best to extricate enough troops from the Creimisa defences to stage his attack and he was still far from ready. Rommel himself turned up at Cruewell's headquarters at 1.40 p.m. and stated that 90 Light would attack [Belhamed](#) from the north at 3 p.m. and there was now no need for 15 Panzer to attack from the south-west; but he wanted Mickl Group and Ariete to move off at 3 p.m. with strong artillery support to which [Trieste](#), Pavia, and the Army Artillery would contribute. Cruewell therefore suggested that 15 Panzer should advance to the saddle between [Belhamed](#) and Ed Duda and there link up with 90 Light and Rommel agreed, though he refused to postpone the attack for an hour to give Mickl Group more time. At 2.35 p.m. the artillery programme started; but the [RAF](#) returned and bombed Cruewell's and Neumann-Silkow's headquarters, causing further delay.

ii

While this grave threat was developing against 6 Brigade, the New Zealand Division continued to operate with little or no help from either 13 or 30 Corps, and the better co-ordination with the [Tobruk](#) garrison with [Freyberg](#) hoped would result from Godwin-Austen's presence within the fortress was not forthcoming. Both Corps remained out of step with events and tended to guard against the previous rather than the current emergency. Thus at 1.45 a.m. on the 30th 13 Corps signalled to 7

Armoured Division as follows:

ED DUDA attacked by 55 tanks and inf bn was captured by enemy. Now taken back but situation in area precarious. Most strongly urge you create diversion by advancing on enemy WEST of NZ DIV as quickly as possible to-day.

¹ Kriebel.

For [Freyberg](#), to whom it was reported at 2.30, this was the first reliable information about the Ed Duda attack. It was sent in lowgrade cipher and therefore reached him quickly; but other signals intended to guide the operations of the Division this day were despatched by high-grade cipher or LO and arrived too late to take effect. The first of these, sent at 8.15 a.m., told [Freyberg](#) to push on westwards towards [El Adem](#) as soon as he was in contact with 1 South African Brigade and was satisfied that he could hold his 'present positions against all comers'; this did not reach him until 12.10 p.m. but was in any case quite impractical. The next was signed by Brigadier Harding at 9.05 a.m. and would have been much more helpful. It stated that the eastern side of the Corridor would be from [Sidi Rezegh](#) through [Belhamed](#) to the present positions of 70 Division, and that it was to be defended with 'every defensive device available or obtainable'. This was what Brigadiers Barrowclough and [Inglis](#) had both recommended and [Freyberg](#) also strongly favoured; but it arrived far too late. Another signal of 9.10 a.m. warning 'that [BELHAMED](#) will be attacked today' did not reach [Divisional Headquarters](#) until 9.49 p.m. and a fourth of 10.20 a.m. arrived at 7.50 a.m. next day.

From the command point of view, formations in Eighth Army were worse off than ever. Although only a few miles apart, each brigade acted largely in ignorance of what the others were doing. [Freyberg](#) was able to talk from time to time by R/T with Norrie and Pienaar, but these contacts were less useful than they might have been, mainly because Pienaar received contradictory orders from General Gott. Army Headquarters scarcely entered the picture.

Thus the signal from Godwin-Austen of 1.45 a.m. about Ed Duda led to an order to Brigadier Pienaar at 6.15 a.m. to move to the escarpment south of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and then to Abiar el-Amar, west of 24 Battalion and south of Ed Duda. [Freyberg](#) of

course knew nothing of this, while Pienaar (like Gott) thought Ed Duda was in [Freyberg's](#) area, starting another train of misconceptions. To meet this new order, Pienaar sent an infantry battalion north-westwards with field and anti-tank guns, but it was halted by enemy fire some miles short of Point 178 on the southern escarpment. Later in the morning Gott, Norrie and the BRA of 30 Corps, Brigadier Aikenhead, all reached Pienaar's headquarters and agreed that 1 South African Brigade should not now make straight for Point 175 (which was reported to be strongly held by the enemy) but for Bir Sciafsciuf and attack westwards from there along the escarpment towards 175. This was a serious mistake, as there was far less chance of regaining this feature from that direction than by a combined effort by the composite armoured brigade ¹ and the South Africans from the south. Indeed the latter was the only practicable method, and the arrival of the South Africans at Bir Sciafsciuf would make little difference to the general situation. [Freyberg](#) nevertheless agreed when Norrie outlined the scheme to him at midday, no doubt thinking that the British armour would be included in the move.

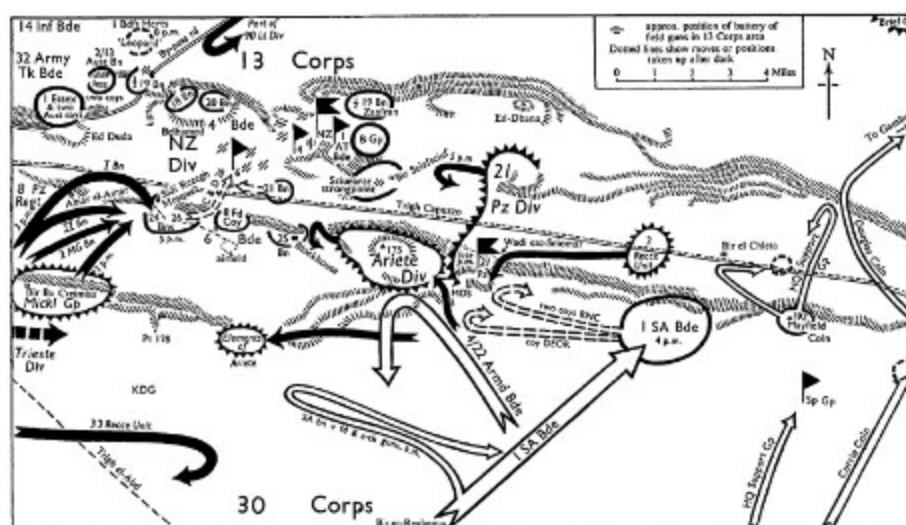
What the South Africans were doing was a vexed question to the New Zealanders in more ways than one. Dawn had revealed a great mass of transport on Point 175, and in the New Zealand Division there was much doubt as to whether it was South African or enemy. Even after [Freyberg](#) spoke to Norrie at 7 a.m. he was still uncertain. An attack from the east along the Trigh Capuzzo started at 7.30 and for a few minutes this distracted attention from the lorries 'congregated on the edge of the escarpment'. ² The attack was easily repulsed by 44 Royal Tanks with artillery support, and at 7.48 a.m. [Divisional Headquarters](#) learned for certain that the transport and tanks on the skyline just east of 175 were enemy. [Freyberg](#) and Brigadier Miles had issued tentative orders to concentrate all field guns on this tempting target, and the CRA now ordered 4 r.p.g. per minute for three minutes starting at 8.35.

At the appointed time the whole feature began to erupt with smoke and flame as the NZA fired its heaviest concentration of the campaign. When the scene cleared only a few tanks and lorries remained in sight, most of them on fire, and when tanks reappeared a little to the west, 6 Field Regiment fired a regimental concentration on them at 8.45. Then the regiment turned its attention to tanks reported just south-east of [El Adem](#).

From then onwards the elements of Ariete on Point 175 preferred to keep out of sight; but their presence there constituted a threat to 6 Brigade and gave the enemy observation over most of the Divisional area. It made Brigadier Barrowclough's position awkward, to say the least, and the units of his brigade scanned the southern escarpment and the ground to the south-east for signs of the South Africans. A commentary on their progress in a series of signals reached Brigade Headquarters and made it seem likely that they would appear at any moment. At 10.30 a.m., for example, they were supposed to be only four miles away, but no direction was given and the men did not know where to look for them. At 11.10 a.m. the 6 Brigade battalions were told that the South Africans were 'making for Pt 175' and 25 Battalion could see guns and tanks firing to the south-east.

¹ Both armoured brigades had been amalgamated during the night under Brig Gatehouse's command, giving him a tank strength of about 120, though this amalgamation does not seem to have become fully effective until late on 1 Dec.

² G Branch diary.



COUNTER-ATTACK ON SIDI REZEGH, 30 NOVEMBER

Any hopes of help from that quarter, however, were doomed to disappointment. The British armour spent another wasted day in indecisive skirmishing with Ariete and what were wrongly thought to be groups of German tanks at various points.

When 8 Hussars and 5 Royal Tanks chased Italian tanks in the morning and knocked out nineteen of them there was much rejoicing, and as a result the 4 Armoured Brigade war diary describes this as 'a very pleasant day'. Heavy gun fire was heard in the direction of Sidi Rezegh in the late afternoon and was still to be heard when the armoured brigade moved south at dusk to its customary night laager. An intelligence summary of 7 Armoured Division describing the situation as known up to 9 p.m. makes it clear tht Gott thought that Ed Duda was a New Zealand position, and adds that it was heavily attacked from the north-east and south-west this day. But the New Zealanders, it adds, 'were only forced to retire in the SIDI REZEGH area as far as is known'. To tank enthusiasts who refused to concede that any ground was vital, this may have seemed a small matter; but to those of 6 Brigade who were being overrun by German tanks (as the British armour retired of its own accord from the battlefield) it appeared very differently.

An Italian M13 tank damaged in the morning's clash drove into the lines of 8 Field Company at 1.12 p.m. flying a white flag. One of its crew was dead, another wounded, and the remaining two surrendered. These said the bombardment of Point 175 had caused many casualties and much damage.

This was, however, a rare bright spot in a dismal scene. Everything depended on getting help to hold the long brigade front and to oust the Italians from Point 175. The battalions of 6 Brigade now had the following fighting strengths ¹:

	Officers	Other Ranks
24 Bn	4	159
25 Bn	10	245
26 Bn	11	334
21 Bn (attached)	1	91

These figures revealed, as Barrowclough says, 'the extraordinary losses we had sustained', and it was evident that the brigade was 'far outnumbered by the enemy colns now assembling on the escarpment to the SOUTH and WEST of us.' ²

¹ As reported to 6 Bde HQ; experienced riflemen were very few indeed.

² Report in 6 Bde war diary.

To the infantry of 6 Brigade it seemed that 'the usual afternoon attack is developing', as the Brigade IO noted at 3.45 p.m. 'Can our thin red line hold out?', he asked. ¹ He soon learned that this was no ordinary affair, as the field gunners already knew. They had been extremely busy for hours engaging fleeting opportunity targets, hostile batteries which were shelling the infantry in their shallow defences, and various clusters of vehicles to the south and south-west. Some of the large-calibre guns the enemy used were beyond the range of the 25-pounders and Colonel Weir would have been glad of the help of 7 Medium Regiment, RA; but these valuable guns had gone with Pienaar to Bir Sciafsciuf at the other end of the battlefield.

There was therefore no relief from this fierce shelling for the infantry and supporting arms and these suffered 'a real hammering with heavies' ² as well as from smaller-calibre guns and mortars. C Company of 24 Battalion, facing generally south-west, could plainly see German tanks refuelling at Bir Bu Creimisa and saw Hurricanes bomb them with little apparent effect. To the south infantry were forming up in threatening fashion and the tanks moved off to the right until they were due west of 6 Brigade. Captain Tomlinson counted forty of them, and at 3.55 p.m. Shuttleworth told Brigade there were fifty tanks a mile and a half away approaching rapidly from the west.

At this stage shellfire increased greatly throughout the brigade area, telephone lines were cut, and the situation soon became confused. The infantry and Vickers gunners nevertheless offered fierce opposition to enemy infantry attacking from the south and halted their advance. The two-pounders were then systematically eliminated from the defence, chiefly by mortar fire, and there was nothing to stop the tanks.

Weaknesses in the anti-tank layout were now exposed, too late to remedy them. There were six or eight 2-pounders in direct support of 24 and 26 Battalions, but the 18-pounders, Bofors, and 25-pounders were all below the escarpment, which in this sense handicapped the defence. The Matildas of 44 Royal Tanks might have been even more valuable, but the Ravenstein papers had labelled the eastern flank as the likeliest source of danger and the I tanks stayed there, together with anti-tank guns not strictly needed.

'The two anti-tank 2-pdrs were the first to go', says a private of C Company of the 24th, 'and part of the shield of one landed on the side of my slit trench.'³ His company commander, Captain Tomlinson, says the 2-pounders were 'soon reduced to heaps of

¹ 6 Bde Log Diary.

² Mantell-Harding.

³ L. M. Nelley.

tangled metal, their gunners firing to the very last.' Major Mantell-Harding, CO of 26 Battalion, signalled urgently to Brigade for anti-tank reinforcements and two portées drove up rapidly; but they came under concentrated fire from tanks as they breasted the escarpment and were shot to pieces. Then, at a critical moment, the field guns ceased fire. Mantell-Harding at once complained to Brigade, to be told a little later that the 25-pounders had used up their ammunition. The guns were quickly replenished and resumed firing; but the end was already in sight.¹

So much metal was screaming through the air at this stage that few men cared to keep their heads up for very long; but those who did saw what looked like a well-planned manoeuvre executed with great precision. In reality it was not at all what General Cruewell ordered. He had given the saddle west of [Belhamed](#) as the objective of the panzers: General Neumann-Silkow decided instead to send 8 Panzer Regiment 'across into the area of Mickl Group and to attack [Sidi Rezegh](#) first'² so as not to expose its right flank. The regiment descended from Bir Bu Creimisa and I Battalion under Captain Kuemmel, with 88-millimetre guns in close support, made straight for the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment at a point 1000 yards east of Abiar el-Amar and began to descend at once, finding the slope unexpectedly steep. II Battalion under Captain Wahl and the field and medium guns, echeloned to the right rear, came under heavy fire from 6 Brigade and Wahl turned to face this. I Battalion carried on eastwards along the foot of the escarpment towards the Mosque, meeting little opposition; but II Battalion met fierce resistance and Colonel Cramer ordered Kuemmel back to the top to help overcome this. To add to the vigour of the infantry

component, 2 MG Battalion joined in on the left of Mickl Group, making up a force roughly equal to three infantry battalions; but, heavily though this outnumbered the defenders, it could make little progress until the tanks broke the back of the defence. About 5.15 p.m. the tanks drove in close and began to take prisoners, but this process lasted until dusk and made Neumann-Silkow postpone the [Belhamed](#) operation until next day.

For the remnants of 24 Battalion the situation looked hopeless as soon as the anti-tank guns were lost. The tanks 'deployed in groups of threes ... and came on in this formation across our whole front', Tomlinson says. 'Their fire power was terrific.' He sent a message to his platoons to 'lie flat in their slit trenches and to allow the tanks to pass over them and when they had gone through to engage their infantry.' But 8 Panzer Regiment was too cautious and the trenches too shallow for this stratagem to succeed. The tanks

¹ See Llewellyn, p. 172.

² 15 Pz Div diary.

'cruised around with their guns depressed and collected our sections one by one.' The few who offered resistance or tried to get away were shot down. For a few moments Tomlinson hoped that the light would fail soon enough to let some of the men slip away; but tanks appeared from behind and enemy infantry were 'swarming over the whole area.' Of his original company only fourteen survived and all these were taken prisoner.

A and B Companies of 26 Battalion were astride the track which led past the Mosque to the airfield and on the flat desert to the south and, like the companies of the 24th, they could do nothing to stop the tanks (though the mortar platoon kept on firing). They, too, were overrun, though a pause when the attack reached the Mosque raised slight hope that they might be saved. Captain Tolerton had asked Brigade for permission to withdraw while it was still possible, but this was refused. 'The din at this time was terrific', Mantell-Harding says, and 'dust and smoke blinded everything'. Cloaked by the flying sand and smoke, most of 8 Platoon managed to

get away; but the rest of A and B Companies were captured. Then it was the turn of the two unit headquarters, Shuttleworth's and Mantell-Harding's. Shuttleworth gave Brigade a running commentary by telephone and about 5.20 p.m. he reported tanks within 50 yards. 'When I rose from my trench what a sight met my eyes in the growing darkness', Mantell-Harding says. 'We were ringed in by Hun tanks and their infantry were collecting the prisoners.' The last few carriers had put up a gallant resistance and were now in flames.

A solitary anti-tank portée near the Trigh Capuzzo engaged a tank coming down the escarpment and knocked it out. This greatly cheered those at Brigade Headquarters who saw it, but it was evident that this gun could not stop the panzer force if it chose to carry on. Nor could C and D Companies of the 26th, on the crest of the escarpment, resist for long if the enemy pushed eastwards, though their positions were not so accessible to tanks. Major Walden of D Company therefore talked the matter over with Captain Thomson of C, and they decided to draw back eastwards to link up if possible with 8 Field Company and form some sort of line covering Brigade Headquarters. They had only eighty men between them and these withdrew out of sight of [Sidi Rezegh](#) and took up fresh positions, facing chiefly west, around the strongpoint captured by Lieutenant Nottle two days before. Walden and Thomson then walked east-wards to locate 8 Field Company and co-ordinate defences, and in their absence the two companies, hearing tracked vehicles approaching in the dark, withdrew towards Brigade Headquarters.

Brigadier Barrowclough had meanwhile ordered Major Burton of 25 Battalion to send his four 2-pounders to help Shuttleworth, a hazardous move, since the tanks of Ariete were a constant menace from the other side of the Rugbet en-Nbeidat. Then, when things grew worse, Barrowclough ordered the whole battalion to move at once to the Mosque, and Burton was extricating his three companies from their positions around the Blockhouse when the threat from Ariete suddenly materialised. About 5 p.m. enemy tanks attacked from the mouth of the Rugbet, Burton advised Brigade, and he was told to stay and fight them. The four leading tanks were engaged by the gun L2, which set two on fire in quick succession, damaged the third, and caused the fourth to disappear quickly. The other three portées of L Troop backed over a rise to help and the Italians were soon discouraged. The infantry had meanwhile reoccupied their former positions and were told that the move was 'off' for the time being. At

10.40 p.m. Burton was warned once more to be ready to move to [Sidi Rezegh](#), in the unlikely event that the South African brigade might need to be met there, but no such call came. After midnight he was glad to receive two more 2-pounder portées, half of O Troop, 34 Battery, sent up to reinforce his position. 'Around us we could hear the rattling of tanks as they moved into position ready to strike at dawn', he says. 'Coloured flares lit the sky' and the night, as he adds, was 'full of anxiety.'

Just west of 25 Battalion was 8 Field Company under Major [Currie](#),¹ which had no anti-tank guns and therefore spent an anxious time wondering what was happening in the west. Walden and Thomson of the 26th with their guide, Sergeant Dodds, ran into 33 Reconnaissance Unit on their way to Currie and were captured. The Germans, carrying on eastwards in the darkness, were then suddenly engaged by the four Vickers guns of 9 MG Platoon and a section of 8 Field Company made a most successful bayonet charge. The Engineers rescued the three prisoners and captured several useful vehicles and much equipment, including some welcome antitank guns. The German unit fled. Later in the night the other half of O Troop with two 2-pounder portées joined 8 Field Company. Half a loaf was better than no bread and Currie was duly grateful, though the situation remained precarious.

Below the escarpment and facing generally towards Point 175, the small remnant of 21 Battalion had spent most of the day in shallow trenches under continual artillery fire. Then at 4.40 p.m. Major Fitzpatrick was ordered to deploy west of the brigade MT park and facing [Sidi Rezegh](#), which entailed only a short move but more digging in hard rock. In the course of this stragglers

¹ [Lt-Col A. R. Currie](#), DSO, OBE; [Wellington](#); born [Napier](#), 12 Nov 1910; military engineer; OC 8 Fd Coy Oct 1940–Jul 1942; CO NZ Engr Trg Depot Apr–Jul 1943; OC [7 Fd Coy](#) Jul–Nov 1943; three times wounded; Director, Fortifications and Works, Army HQ, 1946–49; Chief Engineer, NZ Army, 1951–60.

came through from the Mosque area and signs of disaster there became only too plain. After dark the area of the Mosque was ominously outlined by blazing vehicles and Fitzpatrick's 160 men had every reason to feel apprehensive. Their positions were strengthened, however, by anti-tank guns which came forward during

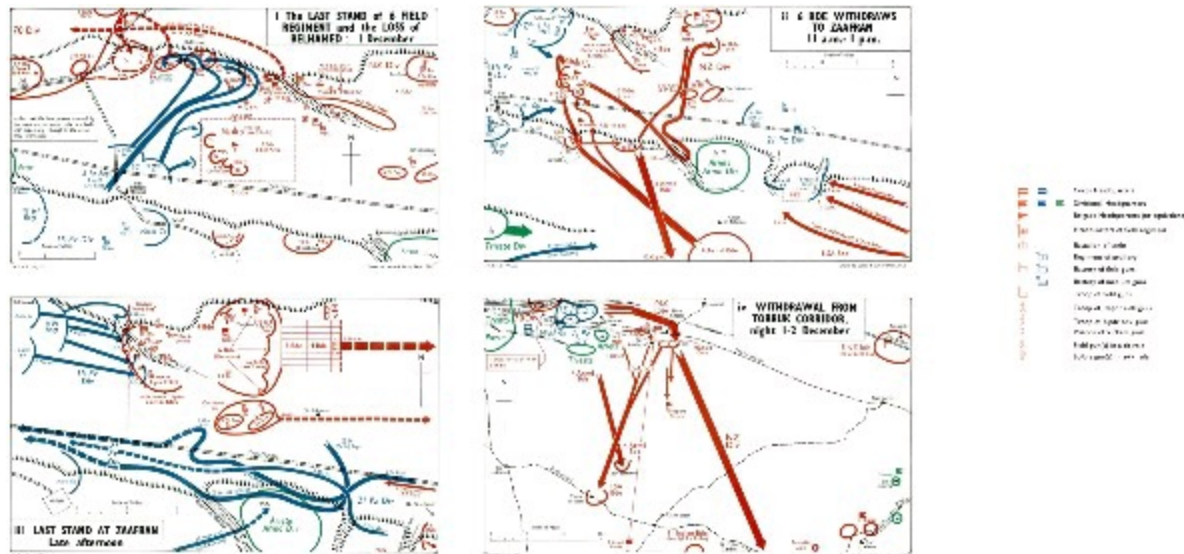
the night from 4 Brigade: the four 18-pounders of Q Troop, 34 Battery, and some 2-pounder portées of 65 Regiment, RA. The transport was all assembled ready for an expected move during the night; but no such move took place. Before dawn on 1 December the vehicles therefore had to open out once more to daylight formation.

After dark on the 30th Barrowclough ordered the remnants of his brigade to stand by in readiness to move into [Tobruk](#). The Corridor was still open (and was in fact used this night to evacuate wounded from the 6 Brigade ADS) and it seemed that further disaster might be averted by posting the fighting troops facing outwards from somewhere near Ed Duba, with the field guns in support and the non-essential vehicles inside the fortress. But [Freyberg](#) still did not feel free to sanction this and said he would put the matter to 13 Corps for a decision. In the end 6 Brigade was told to stay where it was; the South Africans had been ordered to recapture [Sidi Rezegh](#) during the night and the British armour would give every help at first light. The proposal for the South Africans was vague and dubious and Barrowclough placed no reliance on it; nor did he expect much from the British armour, which had exerted little influence on the battle so far as he could judge. He therefore faced the coming day with a 'fairly settled presentiment of disaster', ¹ and all he could do to delay it was to move his field artillery northwards.

Even this move was much discussed before it was authorised. Colonel Weir of 6 Field Regiment had pointed out that it would be impossible to hold on for long next morning without adequate infantry cover, and he wanted to put his guns in behind some properly established defences before dawn. The obvious solution was that which Barrowclough favoured and he put it to Divisional Headquarters. Weir obtained permission to state his case to the CRA, but Brigadier Miles was away on a mission to [Tobruk](#) and he spoke instead to Colonel Gentry, telling him that 'unless the Regt was covered, we stood to lose all of it'. Gentry agreed; but he could not sanction a move into the [Tobruk](#) defences. Eventually Weir and Barrowclough decided that the field guns should move a short distance northwards (averaging less than two miles) to the eastern end of [Belhamed](#), where they would be beyond MG and

¹ Barrowclough, report, Dec 1941.

mortar range of **Sidi Rezegh**. After a moonlight reconnaissance Weir issued the necessary orders and the four batteries moved independently. When dawn came most of the guns were still hooked on to their quads and unready for any but emergency action, which scarcely enhanced their prospects of survival. Nearby was **Freyberg's Battle Headquarters**, also perilously exposed.



Belhamed and Zaafran, 1 December 1941

iii

It is a measure of the inexperience of the Division in its first desert campaign that throughout the ordeal of 6 Brigade in the afternoon of 30 November tanks, guns, and other defensive resources which were well within reach lay idle, awaiting the onslaught from the east predicted in the Ravenstein papers. This attack was expected from minute to minute, but it did not come, though at 5 p.m., when the panzers were closing in on the Mosque, there was a threatening movement of tanks and infantry to the east which attracted much attention and caused needless apprehension. Not only 4 and 8 Field Regiments, which had covered the eastern flank all day, but 47 Field Battery as well were told to stand by to meet the long-awaited attack along the Trigh Capuzzo. But 26 Field Battery and the Vickers guns at the Sciuearat strongpoint, with some help from the Matildas of 44 Royal Tanks, quickly discouraged what was in fact a half-hearted move by remnants of 21 Panzer. The field guns set one tank on fire, four other tanks were immobilised, and the rest of the enemy withdrew. Brigadier Miles came forward and soon judged that there

was little to fear on this front. Just before dusk, therefore, 47 Battery and the guns of 4 Brigade were released from their stand-by and turned to engage panzers on the escarpment near the Mosque, in belated recognition of the far greater danger which threatened from that quarter. Neither of the two composite battalions, Colonel Hartnell's and Major Cochran's, came to grips with the enemy in the east and nor did 'B' Group, though the latter lost its CO, the redoubtable Colonel Oakes, who was killed by shellfire. The main activity of the day here was counter-battery fire, in which the New Zealand guns were handicapped by their shrinking stocks of ammunition and could not therefore give as much as they received.

Fourth Brigade Headquarters was not far from the main gun group of 4 Field Regiment, between [Belhamed](#) and [Zaafan](#), and was only too well aware of the attentions the enemy paid to these guns. The worst hit were those of 25 Battery, which for the second successive day endured shell and mortar fire of such intensity and precision that for long periods the gun positions were quite untenable. Careful searching fire 'neutralised' (in the euphemistic jargon of the day) the most troublesome hostile battery, but A Troop then suffered a direct hit on one gun and so many near misses on the others that the gunners were forced to take cover and engage targets from then onwards with rounds of gun fire as opportunity offered. Eventually it was decided to move 25 Battery about 1000 yards westwards, and since the guns were still under heavy fire the gunners prepared to take them one at a time to the new position. Before they could do so, however, the 'attack' from the east demanded their attention, and three guns of A Troop and two of C were manned by whoever was at hand and fired over open sights at the tanks and lorries to the east, attracting much return fire which pounded the gun lines. At the end all guns of A Troop were damaged and unfit for action; but another urgent task resulted from the arrival of the panzers in the area of the Mosque and C Troop, which had moved under heavy fire to the new gun area, went at once into anti-tank positions covering 4 Brigade Headquarters. This crisis passed, two guns went into action with E Troop of V/AA Battery, one gun of A Troop, quickly repaired, went into a temporary position overnight, and work on the other damaged guns continued. Casualties were mercifully light though much damage was done to guns and transport.

the main isolated from uncertainties in the east and disaster in the south. The war diary of the 20th has the following entry for 30 November:

Quiet day. Position apparently stable. Troops in good spirits.

There seemed ample strength on [Belhamed](#) to deal with occasional small movements of enemy to the north and north-west and there were rumours of substantial help. One account, for example, stated that there were 1000 Australians and 50 tanks about to 'come out of [Tobruk](#) to relieve us'. ¹ Another was that a South African brigade was to recapture Point 175, thereby conveying the news that this position had been lost. Then there was talk of two armoured brigades, soon to be followed by a third, which were to help overcome all remaining enemy resistance. Captain Quilter studied the attack on [Sidi Rezegh](#) closely and was one of the few who concluded that 6 Brigade had been overrun. He reported accordingly to Brigade Headquarters and was assured that he must be wrong, though 4 Field Regiment was at that very time firing at the panzers. After 9 p.m. 20 Battalion was told that the South African brigade was about to recapture [Sidi Rezegh](#) and there was therefore no need to worry.

¹ Allison. It was a garbled version of an 18 Bn patrol report.

Brigade Headquarters was still more concerned about the eastern flank and when Major Gibbon of 44 Royal Tanks called later in the night he and the BM talked about this to the exclusion of dangers elsewhere. ¹ Captain Smyth ² of 6 Field Company also called to point out that 'the eastern flank was thinly held and vulnerable.' ³ [Brigadier Inglis](#) joined these discussions and agreed that the brigade position should close in towards [Tobruk](#) so that the front in the east occupied 'the ridge running SE from [BELHAMED](#) to Pt 151', ⁴ a mile west of Sciuearat. This was suggested to Division and duly vetoed. The loss of [Sidi Rezegh](#) had put any such move this night out of the question. Failing such a major redistribution, the staff carried out minor adjustments in the east to strengthen the brigade defences, among them the move of an MMG platoon from the area of 20 Battalion to the Sciuearat strongpoint. A troop of 259 Anti-Tank Battery and about two platoons of [1 Buffs](#) which had been defending Corps Headquarters now came under [Inglis's](#)

command and were all sited facing east, and 44 Royal Tanks, with seven Matildas, was similarly committed. Even at this eleventh hour it was not realised that the most dangerous opponent was the panzer force which had recaptured [Sidi Rezegh](#); but a concession was made in favour of 6 Brigade when the anti-tank troop was redirected to Barrowclough's headquarters.

The Divisional staff had strong personal reasons for over-estimating the threat from the east, for it was chiefly from that quarter that they had been shelled throughout the day. The open spaces to the west on the way to Ed Duda seemed thrice blessed by comparison with the battered and shuddering slopes of the wadi which housed but failed to shelter [Divisional Headquarters](#) and the 4 Brigade guns. Early in the afternoon of the 30th [General Freyberg](#) decided to move westwards and sent the GSO III (Ops), [Captain Fairbrother](#),⁵ to reconnoitre a new location somewhere north of the Mosque. Having pegged out a new site after a quick survey, [Fairbrother](#) waited for Headquarters to arrive as scheduled; but it failed to appear. As he waited, however, he saw the whole development of the panzer attack against 6 Brigade and it was a revelation to him (and to G Branch when he duly reported this event) that so many German tanks—nearly fifty—remained in action.

¹ On his way back this night, Maj Gibbon was taken prisoner. He had given splendid support to 4 Bde and was very well liked by the New Zealanders. Later he renewed the acquaintance when he escaped in [Italy](#) and spent a short time with some of them in partisan-held areas of [Yugoslavia](#).

² Capt B.S. Smyth; [London](#); born Dunedin, 2 Nov 1908; architect; wounded 23 Jun 1942.

³ 4 Bde diary.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ [Brig M. C. Fairbrother](#), CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; [Wellington](#); born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942–Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr–Dec 1943; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun–Oct 1944; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd Adv Base 2 NZEF, Sep 1945–Feb 1946;

Thus darkness came with the problem of where to set up [Divisional Headquarters](#) still unsolved. [General Freyberg](#) still regarded the Divisional position as being part of the [Tobruk Corridor](#) and interpreted in this sense instructions conveyed by the GSO II of 13 Corps in the afternoon that the Corridor was to be held at all costs. On top of this came a note at 8.15 p.m. from the wireless interception officer that 15 Panzer would probably attack [Sidi Rezegh](#) and 21 Panzer [Belhamed](#) at 'dark to-day', and that Africa Division was in the west. The German intention, the note stated, was to 'stop you withdrawing'; but this was ambiguous. [Freyberg](#) might not have considered a westward move a withdrawal, and it was not clear that the enemy was trying to cut communications between the New Zealand Division and the [Tobruk](#) garrison.

Action of some sort was clearly essential, however, to remedy the serious deterioration of the Division's situation; but it was hard to know what to do. The Corps orders, as [Freyberg](#) understood them, insisted that the present positions be held at all costs; but only decisive intervention by the British armour and the South African brigade next day could avert disaster. Wireless communications between Division and Corps were too slow to meet the case, and [Freyberg](#) therefore sent Brigadier Miles into [Tobruk](#) at 8 p.m. on an urgent mission to General Godwin-Austen. Before contact was lost by R/T he had urged Brigadier Pienaar to 'push on, push on with the bayonet', ¹ and at 9.15 p.m. he despatched a message to Pienaar which read as follows:

[SIDI REZEGH](#) was captured by the enemy this afternoon. Our posn is untenable unless you can recapture it before dawn 1 Dec. You will therefore carry out this task at once.

This was carried by Major [Bonifant](#) ² of Divisional Cavalry, who travelled in a carrier accompanied by Lieutenant [Wilder](#) ³ in another carrier. Both got through safely. In the meantime [Freyberg](#) could do no more than keep Corps posted with events by W/T and hope that measures taken outside the Division would improve matters. A signal received from 13 Corps at 1.25 a.m. on 1 December, and evidently intended primarily for 30 Corps, stated Godwin-Austen's view that he considered it 'absolutely

essential 7 Armd Div concentrates every effort [to] destroy enemy Tks East and West NZ Div posn'. At 2.50 a.m. [Freyberg](#) signalled to 13 Corps as follows:

¹ GOC's diary.

² [Brig I. L. Bonifant](#), DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; [Adelaide](#); born [Ashburton](#), 3 Mar 1912; stock agent; CO 25 Bn Sep 1942–Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943–Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3–27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan–May 1945; 6 Bde Jun–Oct 1945.

³ [Lt-Col N. P. Wilder](#), DSO; [Waipukurau](#); born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; patrol commander LRDG; CO 2 NZ Div Cav, 1944; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

Still no touch with 1 SA Bde. Orders sent to them by LO but possibly NOT delivered. Germans digging in SIDI REZEGH. Unlikely that 1 SA Bde have captured pt 175.

Somehow Brigadier Miles worked his way in the dark through a mass of traffic and a maze of unfamiliar defences and reached Godwin-Austen most expeditiously at ten minutes past midnight. He explained [Freyberg's](#) predicament as best he could and asked for further orders. Godwin-Austen readily obliged; but a serious misconception entered into the discussion. His view of the Corridor was that essentially it was the link between the New Zealand Division and the [Tobruk](#) garrison. Thus when he insisted that it be held he did not preclude a withdrawal from the [Sidi Rezegh](#) escarpment towards [Belhamed](#) and Ed Duda on something like the lines already suggested by [Inglis](#) and Barrowclough; but [Freyberg](#) did not gather this meaning and took it that he had to stay where he was. Then the South Africans were so near and yet so far; their appearance on the scene might swing the scales in [Freyberg's](#) favour, and it was a hard decision to move away from them and from any help the British armour might provide in the morning.

Whatever was decided, however, had to be decided soon, and [Freyberg](#) was more acutely conscious of this than Godwin-Austen. Miles was sent back with orders which were confirmed in writing (too late to affect the issue) as follows:

(a) Attack by 1 SA Bde on Pt 175 439404 and then on [Sidi Rezegh](#), to proceed; if successful posns gained to be consolidated; if not, NZ tps to withdraw to area N

of Ed Duda – [Belhamed](#), hold [Belhamed](#) and keep in touch with 70 Div.

- (b) Comd NZ Div to use own discretion about withdrawing dets from [Zaafran](#) and S thereof.
- (c) XXX Corps being asked urgently to conc 7 Armd Div's efforts on the destruction of enemy tks.

The alternatives in the first section were more apparent than real. [Freyberg](#) could scarcely find out before dawn whether or not the South African attack met with success, by which time it would be too late to close in on Ed Duda. Godwin-Austen evidently could not grasp [Freyberg](#)'s predicament despite Miles's explanation, and [Freyberg](#) in turn failed to perceive that Godwin-Austen really meant him to use his own discretion, not only in minor adjustments in the east but in the major issue of whether or not to stay.

In Godwin-Austen's spoken orders or in the way Miles presented them there must have been some talk, too, of holding the Corridor whatever happened. In his report [Freyberg](#) merely says that Miles returned at 3.30 a.m., 1 December, 'with orders from Corps to say the corridor must be held' and it was thus that he understood them, taking a larger view than Godwin-Austen's of what was meant by the unhappy word 'Corridor'. But others at [Divisional Headquarters](#) gained a different impression, and the G Branch diary states that 'any decision as to whether we are to withdraw into [TOBRUK](#) or fight it out was to be the GOC's', adding that 'It was then too late to withdraw in any case.' Thus the night passed with no real decision taken, little or no hope that the South Africans would succeed in the arduous enterprise to which [Freyberg](#) had committed them, faint expectations of belated help from the British armour, and the certainty that dawn would disclose a sea of troubles.

One important move was nevertheless made while there was still time: all unessential vehicles first of [Divisional Headquarters](#) and then of 4 Brigade were sent into [Tobruk](#), creating another exodus through the Corridor (with surprisingly little friction and few incidents) and freeing the battlefield of hundreds of encumbrances. All possible wounded and prisoners were also sent; but by an unhappy mischance the B Echelons of 6 Brigade were left behind, cluttering up the ground between [Belhamed](#) and the enemy at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and gravely handicapping the defence. The 6 Brigade ADS, like 6 Field Regiment, moved northwards, but not quite so far, so that it rested uneasily in the morning between the guns and their targets. [Divisional](#)

Headquarters had been thinned out, leaving only a tiny Battle Headquarters,¹ which also moved to the eastern end of Belhamed, where it opened up a little north of 6 Brigade Headquarters and close to the new gun areas of 6 Field Regiment. Captain Staveley² of 6 ADS was with Brigadier Barrowclough when telephone communications were re-established with Division and learned that the brigade had been ordered to stay where it was. From this he reasoned beyond all doubt that 'We were for it the next day'. On this point Freyberg also had no illusions. 'Despite these moves', he wrote in his report, 'we knew that there would be no place where we would not be under direct observation.'

iv

Tanks and guns had helped German infantry to reach the Mosque and 7 Armoured Division might similarly have taken the South Africans to Point 175 in the afternoon of the 30th. But 1 South African Brigade had been directed instead to Bir Sciafsciuf and was left unaided to fight its way westwards along the escarpment to its objective. Meanwhile 3 Reconnaissance Unit and part of 21

¹ Consisting of the GOC, the CRA (minus his HQ), the GSO I, GSO III (Ops), the AA & QMG, an 'I' staff of two, the OC Div Sigs and 45 men, two LOs, and the GOC's ADC and PA.

² Maj J. M. Staveley, MC; Auckland; born Hokitika, 30 Aug 1914; medical officer, Auckland Hospital; medical officer 6 Fd AmbMar 1940–Jan 1942; OC 2 Field Transfusion Unit Aug 1943–Apr 1944; Pathologist 2 Gen Hosp Apr–Nov 1944; three times wounded.

Panzer began to take up positions between Sciafsciuf and Point 175, making the task all the harder, so that little ground was gained, despite much urging from General Norrie.

Norrie had boldly led the advance and reached Sciafsciuf about 4 p.m. and the guns hastened to register targets to the west before dark. At the same time South African patrols pushed eastwards to make contact with Mayfield Column, which was overlooking the rear of 21 Panzer from above Bir el Chleta. At dusk 4 Armoured

Brigade withdrew to night laager (rather closer than usual to the scene of the fighting), communications with the New Zealand Division faded as the 'air' filled with 'static' (after [Freyberg](#) had urged Pienaar to 'push on, push on with the bayonet'), and the South Africans faced up to an onerous task. First there was [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#) (now harbouring German infantry soon to be joined by armoured cars and some tanks) and then the unnamed wadi, with the captured New Zealand MDS in between, and finally Point 175, with an unknown number of tanks as well as infantry in occupation.

Pienaar knew of enemy only on the objective and he committed for his attack on Point 175 a modest force of two companies of the Royal Natal Carbineers with an anti-tank troop, with flank protection provided by a company of the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles. The two companies were to meet the third company a mile south-east of Point 175 and expected no opposition on the way and only slight resistance on their objective. At 6.30 p.m. they set out, expecting to reach Point 175 soon after 8 p.m. Within three miles they halted, having come upon 3 Reconnaissance Unit moving up into [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#) and hearing panzers clanking about below the escarpment. The third company similarly halted to the south and the RNC pushed two platoons forward, led by armoured cars and supported by two field batteries. When the enemy offered hot opposition the platoons withdrew and all three companies seemed for a few minutes to be threatened by a tank counter-attack. In the end Pienaar recalled all three companies and they returned to Sciafsciuf, having suffered the loss of six men killed or mortally wounded and eighteen more wounded—evidence enough that enemy fire had been heavy and that the two platoons had carried out something more than a gesture. The medium guns fired their concentrations as arranged at 8 p.m. and repeated them later as requested; but their rounds fell far beyond Esc-Sciomar and could not affect the attack, and at 11.30 p.m. they ceased fire. Five minutes before midnight 7 Medium Regiment was told that the attack had failed.

The two New Zealand Cavalry officers reached Pienaar's head-quarters at 1.40 a.m. on 1 December with [Freyberg's](#) order to capture [Sidi Rezegh](#) as well as Point 175, and Pienaar consulted Norrie, who was close at hand. Both appreciated the dire straits into which the New Zealand Division had been forced; but the hour was too late. Norrie in his report remarks that 'with all the will in the world' this order was

'not possible to carry out', and the best that could be done was to resume the attack on Point 175 in the morning 'with the utmost vigour'. [Freyberg](#), of course, had hoped that Bonifant and Wilder would find the South Africans on Point 175 already, so that his order would entail no more than a move through 25 Battalion and 8 Field Company to counter-attack enemy in the area of the Mosque; but Pienaar knew of no friendly troops anywhere along the escarpment. Acknowledging [Freyberg's](#) order carefully, he played up his current efforts but held out no hope that [Sidi Rezegh](#) was within reach:

I received your above quoted order at a.m. 0140 hrs 1 Dec 1941. I have been ordered to attack and take Pt 175 where I now have the bulk of my Force in action. I ordered an attack which was repulsed by hostile tanks Counter attacking my Infantry. As far as I can now ascertain the attack was a failure. I am here (450400) a matter of thirteen miles away from the objective which I am now ordered to recapture before dawn. With my present dispositions as they are It is not Rept Not possible to reach that point in time. I am trying to isolate point 175 tonight if I cannot succeed to capture it.

With this cold comfort Bonifant and Wilder in their two carriers set out on their return journey; but the hazards had now increased and they had to make a long detour southwards which took up much precious time. They lost a carrier on the way, and it was after dawn when they reached the lines of 25 Battalion. Pienaar's message by the time it reached [Freyberg](#) had therefore lost any point it might have had.

▼

Only the British armour could now save the situation and it was strongly urged to do so by Godwin-Austen in his message of 1.20 a.m. (and in another of 7.55 a.m. to Eighth Army). Gott was as a result moved to signal Brigadier Gatehouse at 4 a.m. as follows:

Enemy captured SIDI REZEGH. Bernard [the New Zealand Division] being attacked from EAST and WEST by tanks. Southern boys [South Africans] SW [sic] of Pt 175. You will recce [SIDI REZEGH](#) area first light and counter attack enemy tanks at all costs, subsequently rally South of Pt 175.

This seemed clear enough; but it could allow confusion between the panzers at [Sidi Rezegh](#) and the Italian tanks at Point 175, and it was followed up by other messages which further clouded the issue. Gott was some miles away and had a curious view of the situation which was hard to reconcile with any such crisis as Godwin-Austen's signal presumed. He thought enemy pressure in the Ed Duda area was somehow meant to extricate 21 Panzer 'from a bad position'¹ in the area north of [Belhamed](#) so that [Africa Corps](#) could concentrate at [El Adem](#) either to cover a major retreat or to counter-attack the British armour. That the destruction of the New Zealand Division was part of the enemy's scheme did not fit his picture at all, and he had no idea that 21 Panzer actually lay astride the Trigh Capuzzo east of that division. The New Zealand Division was the contents of a huge cauldron which Rommel was trying to bring to the boil; but Gott saw it rather as a wedge which was splitting the depleted enemy armour and hastening its destruction by cutting off much of its supplies. He felt it was at last time to concentrate the Jock Columns, but in defence of the exposed flanks of 1 South African Brigade and not of the New Zealand positions, and issued an order to this effect at 5.10 a.m.

¹ 7 Armd Div 'I' Summary No. 42 of 11.30 a.m., 1 Dec (from information received up to 9 p.m. on 30 Nov).

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 24 – BELHAMED AND ZAAFRAN

CHAPTER 24

Belhamed and Zaafran

i

THE sky in the east was lightening when Brigadier Miles returned from [Tobruk](#) on 1 December and it was then too late to withdraw to Ed Duda and [Belhamed](#). By this time, also, there was no hope that the South African brigade might somehow save the day for what was left of the New Zealand Division; but there was faint hope of help from the British armour and [Freyberg](#) had to cling to this. With some difficulty he was dissuaded from trying to get to [Tobruk](#) himself to obtain more satisfactory instructions than those brought back by Miles. As the desert began to waken, Colonel Gentry pointed out that with Germans at [Sidi Rezegh](#) such a journey in daylight was impossible. The Division, in [Freyberg](#)'s view, would therefore have to hold on to its present positions at all costs.

Had this issue been settled earlier much might have been done to improve dispositions; but it was now too late even for this. The weakened elements of the Division therefore remained disposed over a large area with little co-ordination between them and huge gaps in the defences. A night patrol from 18 Battalion had failed to make contact with Ed Duda, where half of 19 Battalion was stationed, and Colonel Peart's two battalions, the 18th and 20th, faced the new day from [Belhamed](#) with some anxiety about the loss of [Sidi Rezegh](#) but in a generally hopeful mood, encouraged by over-sanguine Intelligence. Morale was high. The MMG platoon immediately east of 20 Battalion had gone to Sciuearat and in its former area were the guns of 6 Field Regiment, with 6 Brigade ADS to the south-west, 6 Brigade Headquarters to the south, and Divisional Battle Headquarters to the east. On the southern flank there were the lonely posts of 8 Field Company and 25 Battalion above the escarpment. At Sciuearat were the South Africans and Engineers under Major Cochran, with 26 Field Battery and two MMG platoons, and at [Zaafran](#) the other half of 19 Battalion with more Engineers and two platoons of [1 Buffs](#). The remaining guns of 4 Brigade were in the wadi between [Zaafran](#) and [Belhamed](#). Except for a gap between [Sidi Rezegh](#) and the ground north of [Belhamed](#), observed by enemy eyes and covered by fire, there were enemy in all directions. 'Woke up at first light', [Freyberg](#) wrote in his diary, 'and made everyone dig again—very cold

morning.'

With the cold a mist had settled in the shallow basin between [Sidi Rezegh](#), Ed Duda, [Belhamed](#), and the slight ridge south-west of [Zaafran](#), and for some minutes as this slowly lifted there was complete calm. As soon as it was light enough to pick out neighbouring vehicles there was piecemeal rearrangement in 6 Field Regiment to overcome the more obvious disadvantages of the positions hastily taken up in the night. A few of the gunners felt that 'something was amiss' ¹ and Colonel Weir had grave misgivings; but most men sensed no special dangers and entered into their usual early-morning routine. Primuses were lit and tea made. The guns were still mostly limbered up in column and in front of them were some wounded in ambulances which had missed the night convoys to [Tobruk](#).

ii

The night and then the mist, however, hid widespread enemy activity designed to take 15 Panzer another step forward, this time to [Belhamed](#). Support was to come from 90 Light and the Army Artillery to the north, from Italian artillery to the south-west, from two batteries of 33 Artillery Regiment at [Sidi Rezegh](#), and from Ariete and 21 Panzer to the south-east and east. Silently during the night the men of 15 Motor Cycle Battalion and 2 Machine Gun Battalion had descended the slopes by the Mosque and spread out over the flat to form a long line north of the Trigh Capuzzo facing [Belhamed](#), their FDLs on their right perilously close to the remnants of 6 Brigade. North in the broken ground near the coast German gunners carefully prepared the massive rounds and charges of 210-millimetre guns and checked their calculations. Above the escarpment on both sides of the Mosque the 36 remaining tanks of 8 Panzer Regiment assembled with I Battalion forward, then Regimental Headquarters, followed to the right by II Battalion, anti-aircraft/anti-tank batteries with the tanks, and I Battery of 33 Artillery Regiment bringing up the rear. The tanks were to pass through the infantry on the lower slopes of [Belhamed](#), and the infantry would then rise up behind them for the final assault. It was a heavy and methodical attack which the Germans had in mind, in keeping with a newly revised estimate of the opposition. [Africa Corps](#) had only reluctantly yielded its original view that the force astride the Trigh Capuzzo was merely supply lorries, and it was not until 30 November that it was realised that 'a large force the artillery was in the Duda-

Belhamed pocket.' ² The attacking units therefore expected a hard fight. At 6.30 a.m., before the mist lifted, they attacked.

¹ A. L. Cook, 48 Bty HQ.

² Note by DAK orderly officer in Messages Out file.

In the New Zealand lines there was much uncertainty. Men of 6 Brigade mostly did not know what to expect and the two units of 4 Brigade on Belhamed knew so little that six of their eleven 2-pounders faced the wrong way. No anti-tank mines were laid though the situation cried out for them and three lorry loads were at hand. ¹ An FOO of 4 Field Regiment near 18 Battalion Headquarters reported enemy tanks to the south at 6 a.m.; but 6 Field Regiment FOOs, who could also see them, remained doubtful about their identity and refused to engage them for several critical minutes. Infantry could be seen forming up near the Mosque and then the tanks began to move; but Captain Crawford-Smith ² of 47 Field Battery, who was the nearest of the gunners to them, still thought 'the tanks were our own' as 'the second tank was flying our identification signals'. (Actually, in defiance of the opinion of crusader planners, the leading tank was a captured Matilda.) Next came the prolonged rumble, rising in pitch, and the thunderous concussion of heavyweight 210-millimetre shells in salvoes of three, compressing men in slit trenches, sucking them upwards, and dropping them back, a shocking train of sensations. These huge explosions were marked by angry clouds of smoke and dust which spread in each case over nearly an acre of desert. Medium and lighter guns thickened up this formidable fire and countless MGs joined in, soon replacing the mist with smoke and flying sand. In Colonel Weir's estimation 'two batteries started to shell us at a slow rate, just sufficient to raise the dust', but from 18 Battalion the haze below was too dense to penetrate, though it was possible to see right across it to the south where '21 tanks, guns and lorried infantry' ³ were advancing. In 29 Field Battery two gunners had been detailed to bury German corpses in a nearby sangar and had just finished when they were urgently called to the gun to fire over open sights at German tanks. Bullets were buzzing past 'like angry bees' as they crouched and ran the thirty yards to the gun position. ⁴

The nearest batteries to the enemy were 30 Field Battery on the right and 47 Battery on the left, supported by a few 2-pounders, Bofors, and Bren guns. The field gunners fought in emergency anti-tank positions, unlimbering the guns under fire, and serving them in a thickening fog of smoke and dust which gave the action the character of a bad nightmare. Bombardier [Loughnan](#)⁵ of 30 Battery, for example, as his quad drove madly to a hastily chosen position, tried to drink a mug of tea but spilled most of it.

¹ Not enough to cover the whole front; but all the same a useful quantity.

² Maj H. O. Crawford-Smith, ED (later Crawford); born [Lyttelton](#), 10 Apr 1909; commercial traveller; died [Wellington](#), 20 Aug 1960.

³ 18 Bn diary.

⁴ Henderson, *Gunner Inglorious*, pp. 17–23.

⁵ [Bdr I. H. Loughnan](#); Wahroonga, [NSW](#); born NZ 3 Mar 1918; draughtsman; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941.

The gun was brought into position [he says], sights clear and prepared; but no ammunition ready. Two of the others were trying to get the armour-piercing shot off the limber.... Next I was peering through the open sights at the tanks; they were far too close by now. Their light machine-gun bullets were penetrating the shield and shot was flying in all directions.

Geoff [Oliver](#)¹, the gun-sergeant, swung the trail around and we fired the first shot—with what effect I do not know. After each shot we had to wait several seconds for the dust to clear.

The section commander, Second-Lieutenant Masefield,² stood behind Oliver's gun and the F Troop Commander, Captain [Reed](#),³ moved from gun to gun, both officers heedless of enemy fire. When Loughnan was knocked from his seat by a shell fragment Masefield rushed up and took his place, but a few rounds later a direct hit

destroyed the gun. Masefield at once ordered the survivors over to the next gun, the crew of which had all been hit, and they fired this until another direct hit killed all but one of them, Gunner [Greaves](#).⁴ F Troop was to the left front of E Troop, whose visibility was further diminished by smoke from blazing F Troop vehicles. E Troop had lost its commander the night before, and Major Levy of 31 Anti-Tank Battery directed its fire at three tanks trying to outflank the position, destroying two and disabling the third. Two F Troop guns were still in action when all four guns of E Troop were knocked out almost together, and Levy ordered the survivors to remove vital gun parts and then withdraw. The wounded and those who still sheltered in nearby trenches were taken prisoner when the tanks came through. Drivers of lorries which had come under fire elsewhere did not know which way to turn and drove into the gun lines—from the frying pan into the fire—and added to the confusion. The hard ground where 29 and 48 Field Batteries stood caused AP shot and bullets, spinning madly, to ricochet in all directions.

The tanks were no more than 200 yards from 47 Battery when the telephone rang at C Troop command post and Weir at the other end of the line announced to the bombardier on duty, 'I think those tanks are hostile'. Some of them seemed near enough 'to throw stones at'⁵ when the guns opened fire, hitting two or three tanks and driving the others to the right, where they ran into 30 Battery. Following tanks then engaged 47 Battery from the shelter of transport beside the ADS, 300 yards to the right front, and infantry advancing through the smoke brought the guns under

¹ [Bdr M. G. Oliver](#); born NZ 27 Nov 1914; photo-engraver; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

² 2 Lt J. V. Masefield; born [Akaroa](#), 6 Jul 1917; farmer; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

³ [Maj C. K. Reed](#), DSO; [Napier](#); born Tolaga Bay, 3 Mar 1915; bank clerk; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

⁴ [Gnr S. R. Greaves](#); born [Wanganui](#), 16 Feb 1915; labourer; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

fierce small-arms fire to which drivers and spare men replied with rifle fire thickened up here and there by Brens. The field guns fired independently and one by one they were put out of action, in some cases after running out of ammunition, the crews either rallying to other guns or making their way to the rear. Of seven men, including an officer, at one gun the sole survivor, a bombardier, was twice wounded and then taken prisoner, but not before he fired his last round. Finally, only one gun of F Troop of the 47th under Sergeant [Cooper](#)¹ was still in action and Major Beattie, Captain [Cade](#),² and Lieutenants [Harper](#)³ and [Young](#)⁴ joined the crew. All AP rounds had gone and Cooper fired HE with 119 cap on to increase penetration, and then, when the [Germany](#) infantry closed in, he removed the cap and blasted them with HE at no more than 200 yards' range. Small-arms fire poured in from the left flank, a tank appeared on the gun position, and Cooper fired his last round at it at point-bank range. Cooper was killed after removing the gun sights and a gunner picked them up and took them back. Beattie was then badly wounded, but Cade carried him back through deadly fire, helped over the last hundred yards or so by Gunner [Nevins](#).⁵

Just before this there was a slight lull and Colonel Weir, having seen three or four tanks, 'their turrets almost lifted off, burst into flames', and his 30 Battery fighting magnificently, thought for a moment as others did that 'we were getting the better of him'. He directed the fire of D Troop, 48 Battery, by wireless as the gunners could see nothing, then he went forward and found 30 Battery just about finished, its gun positions dolefully draped with wounded and dead and most of the vehicles blazing. There were nevertheless men on the scene with no thought of unauthorised retreat, and Weir got them to drive off any vehicles that still worked. Back at his headquarters, behind which were 29 and 48 Batteries, he sent unessential transport to take cover and some of the gun crews, thinking a general withdrawal was intended, began to limber up. When Weir told them otherwise they quickly went back into action.

In 29 Battery B Troop blazed away vigorously at several tanks glimpsed through the smoke and dust until they were disabled or disappeared, then the gunners paused. A Troop, however, was blinded by 'clouds of dust and columns of black, sickening smoke'⁶

¹ Sgt J. H. Cooper; born England, 30 Apr 1914; labourer; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

² Brig G. P. Cade, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Hawera, 10 May 1909; Regular soldier; 6 Fd Regt 1940–41; CO 6 Fd Regt 1945; Director RNZA 1948–54; comd Malaya Force 1957–59; Commander, Central Military District, 1960–.

³ Capt J. Harper; Dunedin; born Sydney, 15 Oct 1911; salesman; twice wounded.

⁴ Capt J. H. Young; Christchurch; born Marton, 17 Feb 1906; insurance representative.

⁵ Gnr G. F. Nevins, Tokirima, Taumarunui; born Annedale, 30 Nov 1909; farmer; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

⁶ Sgt R. S. Wait.

and did not fire. The men had been ordered to Take Post and then Stand By behind the tenuous protection of their gun-shields and limbers. While they were thus waiting, Brigadier Miles suddenly appeared on the gun position, a conspicuous figure with his red CRA armband, a light coat under one arm and a rifle under the other. He spoke a few words to each gun commander ('A great fight going on over there—give one shell for one tank—good work—keep it up') and then strolled over to B Troop, 'paying little attention to the pattering of the bullets'. ¹

The tanks hesitated or sought other avenues of approach; but the German infantry came on through the smoke, taking cover behind burning lorries and bringing the gun crews under MG and mortar fire which it was impossible to subdue. As Miles arrived, B Troop resumed firing, but three guns were quickly put out of action, their crews dead or wounded around them, and the troop was overrun except for one gun which withdrew in the nick of time. Miles saw it all thus:

I reached the nearest gun—no. 4—as most of the crews of the others were

casualties by m.g. fire; though we could see nothing for smoke. Then figures appeared which I saw were German infantry, and I told 2/Lt Bevin² to take them on. As I spoke No 3 gun pulled out past us, and a shell struck the quad.... Almost simultaneously a burst of m.g. fire shot down Bevin and most of the crew of No 4 alongside me. I was a bit dazed, but heard a voice say 'Limber up'. Another voice said 'Cannot tow the gun with a punctured tyre' a shell landed to the left of the gun, a splinter slightly wounding me in the small of the back. The German infantry were advancing straight towards us, so I got into a slit trench by the gun with my rifle, hoping to pick off the German officer leading them and the chap beside him with a Tommy gun.³

Miles and the others at the gun position were taken prisoner. Weir had in the meantime ordered A Troop to withdraw when the position became untenable, but his own interpretation of 'untenable' was stoical; for he was at the gun A4 when 'bullets were beating a tattoo on the gun and trailer' and the crew was huddled on the other side. 'How about a drink of water?' he asked, 'my oath I'm dry' and after a quick gulp from a bottle he moved away.⁴ Soon afterwards A Troop withdrew under close-range fire which killed or wounded several men and the quads drove down a perilously steep path on the [Belhamed](#) escarpment, swung left at the bottom, and headed towards [Tobruk](#); hastened by fire from tanks at the top, and accompanied by the one gun of B Troop which got away.

¹ Sgt Wait.

² 2 Lt R. O. Bevin; [Lower Hutt](#); born [Lower Hutt](#), 11 May 1917; clerk; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

³ Letter to Maj-Gen E. Puttick, 21 Apr 1942, from a PW camp in [Italy](#).

⁴ Wait.

C Troop of 48 Battery also failed to find targets in the swirling smoke and did not fire; but D Troop carried on under violent MG and mortar fire until the guns were overrun. C Troop and the survivors of D then withdrew, on the initiative of Major

Sawyers and at a time when Weir was trying to get orders to him to this effect. This battery took a different route, however, and entered the 4 Brigade area where Colonel Duff soon put the four guns into action in an anti-tank role, the spare gunners forming a thin infantry screen in front of them. Weir watched the last gun leave, saw Germans at his own headquarters, and made off over the escarpment on foot, coming under fire from Matildas which came on the scene as he headed eastwards but reaching 4 Brigade unharmed.

The last clash between 6 Field Regiment and the German tanks took place on the By-pass road north-west of [Belhamed](#), as A Troop led a mixed collection of vehicles, including three Bofors of 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, towards [Tobruk](#). Nine tanks appeared as if from nowhere and opened fire, hitting a quad, whereupon Sergeant [Batty](#)¹ brought his gun quickly into action and knocked out the leading tank with his first shot. The other tanks at once withdrew and the group moved on, the field guns and Bofors going into action in close support of infantry then taking up position north-east of Ed Duda.

Losses in 6 Field Regiment on 1 December were the heaviest sustained by any NZA unit in a single day throughout the war: about 14 officers and 170-odd other ranks, to which must be added 60–70 of 47 Battery (5 Field Regiment), which was under Weir's command. Of these, 76 were killed, 150-odd wounded, and over 100 captured. Of 32 field guns, 23 were lost. There were also many casualties in this action in the anti-tank and light anti-aircraft regiments, though the figures cannot be disentangled from losses elsewhere. The battlefield gave ample evidence of the severity of the fighting in terms of bodies, broken guns, and burning lorries, and it was with a heavy heart that Colonel Weir made his escape. To those who watched from [Belhamed](#), [Zaafraan](#), and elsewhere the immense pall of smoke told of a bitter struggle, and Brigadier Latham, BRA of 13 Corps, confirmed this when he explored this ground a day or two later. He was so deeply impressed that he 'picked up a rammer and after having it roughly inscribed sent it to [Freyberg](#)'. 'Practically every gun was a "write off" though in the shops it might have been possible to make up one out of the parts of two', he noted. 'The dead were lying around each gun, each man nearly in his place and burnt out tractors and trailers were just in rear.'² The official report of 8 Panzer Regiment, which had already seen much hard fighting, describes this as 'one of its hardest battles'.

¹ WO I W. Batty, DCM; Auckland; born Tonga, 1 Jan 1905; insurance agent.

² Latham to Kippenberger, 16 Jul 1949.

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The guns of 4 Field Regiment, all of which were within reach and only too anxious to help, could not fire because the smoke curtailed off all of 6 Field Regiment and most of 20 Battalion, a state of affairs which unhappily continued as 8 Panzer Regiment and its supporting infantry carried their attack on to the eastern half of [Belhamed](#). The enemy bombardment was heavier on the western half of the feature and the mortar bombs and shells of all calibres which fell there 'like rain' (to quote one observer) discouraged all but the bravest from raising their heads from their shallow trenches except at infrequent intervals. Major [Snadden](#) ¹ of 46 Field Battery spent an exasperating hour near 18 Battalion Headquarters trying to perceive what was happening in the murky haze to the south and south-east, glimpsing targets from time to time but powerless to bring down fire on them, because telephone lines were cut to pieces and his wireless was out of order.

If 20 Battalion on the eastern half of [Belhamed](#) be regarded as facing [Sidi Rezegh](#) (though in the main it was not) D Company was on the right, elements of Headquarters Company in the centre, and B on the left, with C to its left rear and A 200 yards short of the escarpment to the north. Battalion Headquarters was in the centre of the area. The carrier platoon was to the right of B Company, the mortar platoon with five 3-inch mortars just to the rear, and three of the four 2-pounders of B Troop, 31 Anti-Tank Battery, faced south. The fourth 2-pounder, like 6 MG Platoon, could only fire to the north, and C Anti-Tank Troop, sited to the east, had already gone into action supporting 29 Field Battery. Communications with 18 Battalion had long since broken down; but telephone lines to companies remained intact until the action was well under way and the line to Brigade by a minor miracle kept working until nearly 8 a.m. The battalion had some 370 men on the feature, and with them were 30-odd anti-tankers.

All were in good spirits when the action started and took the approaching

panzers to be the I tanks they expected from [Tobruk](#). Even when they were no more than 300 yards away, most men were only mildly suspicious until 30 Field Battery to the left opened fire. Blazing vehicles and the dust raised by the tanks (some of which dragged brushwood behind them) soon blotted out this panorama and there was a long pause while the tanks methodically engaged 6 Field Regiment, making much use of smoke grenades to blind the gun crews. Two anti-tank guns were knocked out after firing one or two rounds; but B2 escaped harm and continued to shoot at gun flashes in the thickening haze. B and D Companies and the mortars engaged lorried infantry and several detachments

¹ [Maj J. P. Snadden](#), MC; [Wellington](#); born [Te Kuiti](#), 24 May 1913; salesman; twice wounded.

of motor-cyclists, doing considerable damage and causing obvious confusion to the enemy. Several German guns were also spotted and none of them went into action in face of this fire.

So long as the tanks concentrated on the New Zealand field guns the position was not insecure; but Captain Quilter of the 20th realised that this could not last long and reported accordingly to Brigade. Captain Bassett told him to hold on for half an hour, by which time I tanks would counter-attack, and Quilter passed this information on to Major Orr ¹ and the rifle companies. Then the line to Brigade was cut and when the tanks attacked it was too late to get permission to withdraw. A more experienced CO than Orr might have taken it upon himself to fall back when he saw the situation was hopeless; but Orr had only just taken over command of the 20th, the responsibility had suddenly become tremendous, and it was almost unthinkable under the circumstances for him to disregard the brigade order to hold on.

The 29th and 48th Batteries were still engaged in their last desperate struggle with the German infantry when the tanks turned their attention to 20 Battalion, approaching B Company obliquely from its left front. As they did so, several men made gallant gestures of defiance. Sergeant Lochhead, for example, fired a Bren at the slits of a tank no more than 60 yards away until it gave his sangar a long return burst with its MGs. Private [Leckie](#) ² fired all the rounds he had from his Boys rifle, ³

called for more, and kept on firing until a Pzkw IV angrily swung its turret and killed him with a 75-millimetre shell at a range of 50 yards, crumpling up his 'elephant gun' with the same blow. Then, post by post, B Company was overrun, the tanks acting very warily and a few of the German infantry following up closely, the rest held at bay by small-arms fire. Most sections fired until the last and were so engrossed with infantry to their front that they were taken unawares by the tanks, the crews of which were surprisingly considerate and caused few needless casualties by their fire.

C Company and Battalion Headquarters were next and the 'I' Sergeant just had time to destroy his 'maps, messages and code' before the tanks closed in. The action was a bitter disappointment to C Company, which heard the fire but could see nothing through the smoke until three or four tanks suddenly appeared in the east. 'It was then only a matter of the tank commanders saying up and out', a private sadly remarks. ⁴ Both C and A Companies could easily

¹ Maj R. S. Orr, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 4 Sep 1903; electrical engineer; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped, [Italy](#), Sep 1943; safe in [Switzerland](#), Dec 1943.

² [Pte G. Leckie](#); born Seacliff, 3 Oct 1907; farmhand; wounded May 1941; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

³ A .55-inch calibre anti-tank rifle, of little use against any but the thinnest of armour.

⁴ [F. J. Laird](#).

have got away over the escarpment had they been permitted; but when the tanks 'loomed up out of the smoke practically on top of us' ¹ it was too late and A Company, too, was lost. The RMO, Captain [Gilmour](#), ² continued to attend to the wounded in the RAP north-east of Headquarters after he was captured; but by a misunderstanding he was shot dead by a following tank. D Company had meanwhile fired furiously whenever enemy appeared and therefore did not have the same sense of frustration as A and C when its turn came, though Lieutenant Wilson on the

extreme right (and nearest to 18 Battalion) found it hard to order his platoon to surrender (to save the men from any accusation of doing it of their own accord).

The last shots of all seem to have been fired by the gun A2, operated by Bombardier [Marshall](#)³ alone after the rest of the crew were wounded. Marshall had been taken prisoner in [Greece](#), an experience he abhorred, and after escaping he had vowed that never again would he be captured. He remained true to his word and kept on firing the gun single-handed until a tank ran right over it and killed him. The Germans must have been much impressed, because they took the trouble to bury him in the short time they occupied this feature and put up a cross inscribed 'An unknown British soldier'—the only New Zealander on [Belhamed](#) they bothered to inter.

The crew of the gun B4 slipped over the escarpment to safety when the infantry in front of them were captured; but very few others escaped the German dragnet. The only sizable body of 20 Battalion, other than the B Echelon in [Tobruk](#), which escaped capture was the transport detachment with 37 vehicles and 76 men under Lieutenant [Bolwell](#),⁴ the QM, which was below the escarpment and went eastwards with other detachments, including 6 MG Platoon, to [Zaafran](#). Over 400 all told (including a handful of the 18th) were taken prisoner, 370 of them from 20 Battalion.

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Eighteenth Battalion was sited with B and D Companies on the southern flank and A and C on the northern. Of these, C and D were the ones immediately threatened when the remnants of the 20th were overrun, and the situation at the junction of the two units was highly confused. One section of the mortar platoon, nearer to the 20th than to the 18th, was lost, and the crew of the gun

¹ [Cpl K. L. Newth](#) of the Sigs Sec.

² [Capt W. L. M. Gilmour](#); born [Scotland](#), 19 Dec 1914; medical practitioner; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

³ [Bdr F. S. Marshall](#); born NZ 3 Nov 1914; insurance agent; wounded

and p.w. Apr 1941; escaped Jul 1941; killed in action 1 Dec 1941.

⁴ Lt E. W. Bolwell, MBE, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Dunedin, 13 Sep 1900; butcher.

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A4, halfway between the two battalions, was also captured. For a critical minute or two there was a grave danger that the 18th would suffer the same fate as the 20th and Colonel Peart and his adjutant, Captain Crump, ¹ worked hard to keep control of the situation. Both moved from section to section with words of encouragement or abuse, whichever seemed to fit the case. When a few men, seeing some of the 20th surrender, began to put up their hands, Peart and Crump used strong language to make them change their minds, which they quickly did.

The enemy did not immediately carry the attack into the 18 Battalion area, having enough to do collecting and assembling the prisoners from the 20th and reorganising after the severe fighting of the past two and a half hours. In the pause which followed, Peart took stock of his situation and soon realised that, with enemy on three sides of him, he would have to withdraw westwards if the tanks came on. When heavy firing broke out again about 10 a.m. and tanks bore down on D Company, therefore, he ordered a retreat at once, taking great pains to see that it was carried out in orderly fashion. He specified that the men were to walk and not to run whatever fire was directed at them. Some of the FDLs were under such heavy fire, however, that the men were at first reluctant to leave and then some of them started to run, at which Peart quickly intervened. He 'waved his stick and called out in his quiet voice' ² and again gained the upper hand. The first stage was to get below the escarpment to the north, several hundreds of yards away for most sections, and it took a good deal of fortitude to walk this distance under heavy fire. As one private says, 'it seemed like miles and they threw everything at us'. Several vehicles were set on fire and panic could easily have developed; but 'as we got down the bank ... we were still operating as a team'. ³ Some of the tanks had swung south of the battalion area and came against B Company from the south-west, but the Tobruk artillery promptly shelled them and they withdrew southwards. D Company and the remaining mortars engaged infantry in that direction before withdrawing,

and the whole operation was carried through in excellent order with officers and NCOs, as the unit diary says, 'in full command at all times'.

No more than half a mile to the west there was a German anti-tank minefield running southwards from the escarpment and, though two carriers were blown up on this (with a loss of two men killed and two wounded), it proved a great boon. The withdrawing companies crossed the Tobruk By-pass road and the leading sections

¹ Capt S. N. S. Crump; Palmerston North; born Auckland, 18 Dec 1916; bank officer.

² Snadden.

³ R. B. Joyes.

had gone past B/O Battery of 1 RHA when Peart rushed up in a carrier and headed them off. He asked them where they thought they were going, and when they vaguely suggested [Tobruk](#) he said, 'Oh no you're not, you're going to stand and fight' and he 'jockeyed us round into a new position once more on the top, in some old opposition sangars.'¹ Having got in touch with 1 Battalion, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, in its new strongpoint 'Leopard' at [Magen Belhamed](#), and placed himself under command of 14 Infantry Brigade of the [Tobruk](#) garrison, Peart lost no time in getting his men back into action against the enemy who now occupied [Belhamed](#). By 11 a.m. A Company was moving into positions behind the minefield half a mile west-south-west of the former B Company position, and C Company dug in along the top of the escarpment 700 yards west of where A Company had originally been, forming a front facing east with D Company behind them and B in reserve in a wadi to the rear. The occupation was complete by 12.30 p.m.

Tanks meanwhile nosed up to the minefield but did not try to cross it, and after a pause they disappeared. Then some of the [Tobruk](#) I tanks appeared on the scene and they, too, were halted by the anti-tank mines and soon withdrew. German infantry began to dig in a short distance away and subjected the new defence line to

heavy mortar fire, which wounded one or two men and brought the total of 18 Battalion casualties in the action to over sixty.

The main remaining worry was that there was no way of advising 4 Brigade what had happened; but this was unexpectedly overcome when a Stuart tank of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, which had somehow become isolated in the Corridor area, came forward and Peart spoke to Captain Bassett by R/T. Bassett, who had been called to Major Bonifant's tank to receive the message, put on the earphones and to this surprise and delight heard Peart's voice: 'Hullo Brian, it's Jan here, I've withdrawn my Battalion complete, West into the [Tobruk](#) corridor, and filled the gap north of 19th Companies from Duda'.² This was indeed good news; for there had been nothing at [Zaafran](#) until then to suggest that the 18th had not suffered the same fate as the 20th.

▼

Divisional Battle Headquarters had settled down for the night just east of 6 Field Regiment and it was not long after the start of the morning's action that the cluster of vehicles around G Branch office were right in the firing line. A photograph of the scene to the south-west shows bushy tufts of scrub in the foreground, long

¹ Joyes.

² Bassett, letter, 12 Dec 1941.

shadows from the left rear of the camera, the GOC's station wagon thirty yards away with men in the scrub alongside it under fire and [Freyberg](#) and one or two men standing, a great column of smoke behind the car, and vehicles of 6 Field Regiment (including a gun tractor) on the skyline perhaps 200 yards away, some of them burning. It was a grim scene and became even grimmer when C Troop of 48 Battery just to the front hooked on its guns and departed. Lieutenant [Wood](#)¹ of that troop as he drove back 'stopped to have a word with the General who was as cool as a cucumber'.

The South African armoured car, which through its wireless set provided the only

means of communication with 30 Corps, was near at hand, and when German tanks were very close and men ahead were seen putting up their hands [Freyberg](#) decided to make one more appeal to General Norrie for help:

By now the machine-gun fire coming into the area had reached a crescendo of fury, and bullets clanged on the side of the armoured car as the General imperturbably continued his wireless conversation. Sergeant [Smith](#)² came over from the car to where Agar [OC Divisional Signals] stood near the signal office. He jerked his thumb in the direction of the General and spat on the ground expressively. 'The man's mad! Why the hell doesn't he get inside the car?'³

This was just before 7.45 a.m. [Freyberg](#) spoke to Norrie and learned that 'SAs still not on their objective' (as he noted in his diary). Norrie in his report says [Freyberg](#) 're-stated what had occurred and that he was again being attacked and needed assistance'. Then [Freyberg](#) signalled 13 Corps as follows:

Decision taken out of our hands. Being heavily attacked from S and W. 1 SA Bde failed to take point 175 last night but are going to try again this morning. Am in touch with NORRIE.

At the same time Brigadier Barrowclough telephoned to say that his headquarters was 'in trouble & would have to go.'⁴

The withdrawal of Battle Headquarters had already been left perilously late and some of the staff were becoming understandably concerned. When [Captain Fairbrother](#) called out, 'The gunners ahead have their hands up'—no more than 150 yards away—[Freyberg](#) at last ordered the group to break away to the east and rendezvous at 4 Brigade Headquarters. Fire was heavy, Colonel Gentry's driver was at that moment killed, and there was no time to lose.⁵

¹ [Capt W. N. Wood](#); born NZ 11 Mar 1908; school teacher; died on active service 28 Mar 1944.

² [Lt C. Smith](#), m.i.d.; [New Plymouth](#); born England, 9 Apr 1910; mechanic.

³ Borman, Divisional Signals, p. 200.

⁴ Fairbrother.

⁵ By an odd coincidence, Gentry's counterpart in the attacking force, Major Kriebel of 15 Pz Div, also had his vehicle hit at this stage and had to find other transport.

To the rear the scrub thickened as the ground fell away to form a wadi between [Belhamed](#) and [Zaafran](#) which widened as it curled round to the south-east towards Sciuearat. Halfway between [Zaafran](#) and the Blockhouse was a slight ridge, scarcely perceptible on the ground yet practically as high as [Belhamed](#) (though narrower and longer), and 4 Brigade Headquarters was assembled north of the western end of this ridge and on the enemy side of the wadi, about a mile and a half east of 6 Brigade Headquarters. It was no haven of rest, and most of the vehicles of Battle Headquarters made for the shelter of the wadi where the main gun group of 4 Brigade was sited. [Freyberg](#) himself paused on the way and went over to where the remaining Matildas of 44 Royal Tanks were climbing the western side of the wadi near its mouth in a belated attempt to save 20 Battalion.

These seven I tanks had been sent to the east at first light and therefore took some time to respond to the order to help 20 Battalion and arrived too late to intervene. They were nevertheless led west-wards by Captain Ling and climbed a steep slope at the eastern edge of [Belhamed](#) to fight a lone rearguard action. Ling describes in his report the scene of desolation:

The whole of [BELHAMED](#) was a mass of black smoke from the burning N.Z. Div HQ and amongst it in the centre could be seen some six Mark III and Mark IV tanks at 1800 yards range. We fired at them and after a time they sheered off except one, which watched us from a position behind some burning vehicles out of range. My tank received a direct hit on the mantle and was made useless for further firing. I decided to remain in it and control fire of my other tanks. The F.O.O. [of 8 Field Regiment, RA] could not help a lot as he had to conserve ammunition and was only allowed to fire at concentrations of German vehicles.

There the seven Matildas stayed for most of the day, precariously perched along a narrow track with their backs on the edge of a 150-foot escarpment. A second tank was damaged and with some difficulty returned to 4 Brigade, but two Valentines of **8 Royal Tanks**, one of them towed by the other, joined Ling's detachment later in the day. Between them they held off the German tanks, set a command vehicle on fire, and halted the enemy infantry, firing at times at ranges down to less than 100 yards, a gallant and valuable contribution to the defence.

Standing beside his car **Freyberg** was grazed in the leg by a shell splinter, but he brushed his ADC's remarks aside when the latter drew attention to the trickle of blood on his trouser-leg. He duly kept his rendezvous at 4 Brigade Headquarters with Gentry and **Fairbrother**, both of them somewhat breathless after a quick dash under fire, and soon this headquarters withdrew to **Zaafraan**, leaving the gun group in the wadi, covered by a thin line of ad hoc infantry, to carry the main weight of the defence.

vi

The most vulnerable sector of the defence had seemed to be that of 6 Brigade Headquarters covered by the remnants of 21, 24 and 26 Battalions in positions most of which had been hastily chosen in the dark, and which were found in the morning to be facing across a mass of brigade transport. It was some 2000 yards south of where Divisional Battle Headquarters had started the day, with a further gap of 2000 yards to where 8 Field Company and, on its left, 25 Battalion were clinging to some 4000 yards of the escarpment from north of the **Sidi Rezegh** airfield to the Blockhouse. Yet Brigadier Barrowclough's flimsy defences, by the odd fortunes of war, were still holding out after **Belhamed** was lost.

In an arc facing mainly south-west, 24 Battalion (about 100 strong, mostly B Echelon men with two Valentines in support) was on the right with lorries scattered through the area and had no contact either with 47 Field Battery farther north or 21 Battalion to the south-east. The 21st was in the centre and behind it were three Valentines of **8 Royal Tanks**, incapable of manoeuvre but able to fire from hull-down positions in an emergency. Three 2-pounders and three Bofors in an anti-tank role also stiffened the defence here, and behind 26 Battalion on the left, overlooking the

Trigh Capuzzo, were the four 18-pounders of M Troop, 33 Anti-Tank Battery, also much hampered by vehicles in front. Other B Echelon men, including those of 8 Field Company, also occupied defences and did their best to return enemy fire. Five light tanks of 8 Royal Tanks were held in reserve; they could do nothing against German tanks but might be useful if infantry attacked without the panzers.

Barrowclough looked eagerly for evidence of South Africans on Point 175 when it grew light enough and found none. Nor was there any evidence of friendly troops near Sidi Rezegh. 'On the contrary', he says in his report, 'a large infantry force supported by tanks and artillery fire was observed forming up for the attack.' Like the GOC, Barrowclough preserved an icily calm exterior, and when he spoke to G Branch his voice was firm and unhurried. He showed little sign of the immense strain he had endured in the past few days. But as he looked towards the Mosque he knew that he could not withstand the fresh assault that was obviously impending and he prepared himself for the worst. It looked very much as though the great struggle of 6 Brigade would shortly end in complete disaster.

Most of the rank and file of the brigade, however, knowing little of the larger situation, took the unfolding day as just another in a series which had no discernible pattern but ups and downs of violence and quietness, of action and rare spells of rest, of bitter bereavement and fear alternating with renewed hope and confidence. Fact and rumour intermingled and there was a general expectation that the brigade would shortly enter Tobruk for a period of rest. The men who held the outposts of 21 and 24 Battalions had high hopes of succour by British armour and were not suspicious of tanks they saw near the Mosque. Even most artillery observers gave the tanks the benefit of the doubt until their hostility was confirmed. Lieutenant Betts of M Troop was more sceptical and prepared to engage tanks and infantry he saw to his right front at 6.30 a.m. until the nearby infantry persuaded him to hold his fire. 'This was an unfortunate step', he comments, 'as the Hun tanks took advantage of our leniency.'

When the panzers drove past on their way towards 6 Field Regiment, the Valentines engaged them with flanking fire at long range, the three Bofors depressed their barrels and shot away their 40-millimetre ammunition in batches strung together with tracers, and M Troop soon had to send for more 18-pounder rounds. One of the Valentines had to cease fire three times to let its 2-pounder

barrel cool enough to take further rounds. It was a brief period of extreme violence in the course of which the tanks, artillery of all calibres, and the German motor-cycle machine-gunners and mortarmen returned the fire vigorously, though the tanks soon disappeared into the smoke to the north, leaving one or two behind to watch this flank. Most of the 2-pounder portées, conspicuous against the sombre background, were put out of action. On two occasions 21 Battalion men were seen with their hands up, about to surrender, and both times they were 'cried down'. They could see in the distance a long line of men being marched from [Belhamed](#) towards the Mosque, evidently prisoners, a depressing sight, and in the Mosque area it looked as though more German infantry were forming up with tanks to attack 6 Brigade. To Barrowclough it seemed that his brigade 'would be overwhelmed in a matter of 15 minutes or at most half an hour'.

Brigadier Gatehouse had meanwhile moved his composite brigade with 115 tanks from its night laager south of Point 175 in response to the order of 4 a.m. from General Gott to reconnoitre the [Sidi Rezegh](#) area and counter-attack the enemy tanks at all costs. By 8 a.m. the leading units were two miles south-east of the Blockhouse and they halted there for about half an hour while Gatehouse studied the position. He could see the 'largest mass of all arms I have ever seen' to the west, stretching many miles south-westwards from [Sidi Rezegh](#),¹ and took it that this was what he must counter-attack.

¹ Actually Mickl Gp, DAK and 15 Pz Div HQs and administrative elements, merging into Trieste Div on the southern escarpment and Pavia Div to the west.

'If I attack', he reported to 7 Armoured Division, 'it will be straight into a very large number of guns of all sizes which are about three miles from me. The ground between is dead flat and nothing could get across it.' A frontal attack therefore seemed a formidable and perhaps foolish assignment; but it was not required. [Freyberg](#) had meanwhile spoken to Norrie and the information was passed on to Gott, who asked Gatehouse at 8.24 if he could 'get to NZ to help', which evidently did not mean counter-attacking this huge enemy formation. Exactly what it did mean, however, had to be investigated, as Gatehouse did not know where the New

Zealanders were, how many of them survived, or what they were doing. He had been told they were being attacked by tanks; but that was all. The next step was to make contact and find out the details, and at 9 a.m. [8 Hussars](#) followed by 3 and 5 Royal Tanks pushed on towards the escarpment west of the Blockhouse, under artillery fire which Gatehouse instructed the COs to disregard.

As the leading tanks got nearer they could easily identify the New Zealand area from the 'huge pall of smoke and dust about a mile and a half to the North of [SIDI REZEGH](#)'.¹ Gatehouse then ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Drew of 5 Royal Tanks to get in touch with the New Zealand commander, find out all he could, and 'make a plan for an attack against the enemy tanks.'²

This took the impressive array of British tanks and armoured cars towards the lines of 8 Field Company and 25 Battalion in their isolated positions above the escarpment west of the Rugbet en-Nbeidat and these units, unhappily aware of the tragedy that was being enacted below them to the north, feared the worst until they joyfully identified 4 Armoured Brigade. The newcomers entered the area of the sappers and the tanks began to descend the escarpment in single file while Major Currie told Gatehouse what he knew, painting an even blacker picture than the facts warranted, because he thought 6 Brigade Headquarters had already been overrun.

'As we got to the escarpment we could see the New Zealand leaguer with practically every vehicle ablaze, a terrible sight', the diary of [8 Hussars](#) records. 'Away to the left stretching towards [TOBRUK](#) were the German forces.' The tanks of the regiment attracted much fire as they descended and more still when they began to move northwards in line ahead towards 6 Brigade Headquarters. The New Zealanders by the Trigh Capuzzo, under heavy fire, received a worse fright than those above the escarpment at the sudden appearance of these tanks and some of them 'came towards us with their hands up', according to [8 Hussars](#). When they discovered their attitude changed instantly and 'many

¹ Diary of 5 R Tks.

² Ibid.

of them fixed bayonets and formed up behind us wishing us to attack the enemy positions—in the circumstances a very courageous action.’ Had the [8 Hussars](#) diarist known what these men had gone through in the past few days he might have been even more impressed with their readiness to ‘get even with the enemy who had taken such a toll of their comrades’, as Barrowclough puts it. Seeing it all from his embattled headquarters, Barrowclough was immensely proud and entirely supported his men in their attitude. He was as ready as they to try to turn the tables on the enemy.

The 8th Hussars was the weakest of Gatehouse's regiments, however, and had been ordered only to draw the enemy's fire and then retire. Major Sandbach in the leading tank pushed on northwards and the rest followed. Then his tank was hit—by a captured Matilda tank, ironically—and he was killed. Another tank was damaged shortly afterwards, and the regiment withdrew eastwards. Barrowclough had expected the tanks to carry on towards [Belhamed](#); he was dismayed when they halted, and mortified when they withdrew, telling the troops around them to ‘fall back with them and that they would cover their withdrawal.’¹ He at once set out to find the regimental or brigade commander concerned.

This was only a local and pre-arranged withdrawal, however, and not a general retreat as Barrowclough imagined. He was not looking merely for salvation for the remnants of his brigade; the intervention of the British tanks seemed to him to constitute an almost magical reversal of the situation. Now the hunters and the hunted would change roles, his heavy losses would be avenged, and the countless acts of courage and self-sacrifice at [Sidi Rezegh](#) would be rewarded.

In this vengeful mood he came upon Colonel Drew and gave him a careful appreciation of the situation which did not, however, minimise the dangers to be faced. As the diary of 5 Royal Tanks records it, he briefed Drew thus:

there were about 40 German tanks supported by A.T. guns who were in ‘Hull-down’ positions about 1000 yds to the North of his leaguer and who were keeping him under constant gun and M.G. fire whilst he was being heavily shelled by the German Col. [umn] to the West. There was also an Italian Col. to the East at Pt. 175 about 5 miles away but at the moment they were silent. Most of his own 25 pdr and A.T. guns were out of action. His 3 Comd Os were casualties. He asked that an attack

should be made against the enemy tanks to the North.

Drew agreed to do this, though 'it would involve very heavy casualties in view of the extremely difficult position', and said he would get in touch with the CO of [3 Royal Tanks](#) and make a plan. ²

¹ Barrowclough, report.

² In a post-war account (1955) Drew does not remember agreeing to counter-attack the enemy tanks; but the war diary of 5 R Tks is clear on this point and must be preferred.

But, characteristically, Barrowclough wanted immediate action and, seeing no sign of this, concluded that Drew did not mean to counter-attack. He therefore sought out Gatehouse to press the matter further.

Gatehouse had meanwhile set up a small headquarters on the escarpment below 8 Field Company, where he could see as much of the battlefield as the smoke and the bursting shells would allow and at the same time keep in touch with Gott on the 'blower'. He had heard Major Currie's gloomy account of events and still did not realise that [Divisional Headquarters](#) and part of 4 Brigade with its strong gun group was somewhere beyond the drifting smoke in the direction of [Zaafraan](#). All that remained, he thought, was there below him, inside his semicircle of tanks, and he reported in this sense to Gott at 9.55 a.m.:

We are in NZ leaguer, it is almost finished certain number of lorries have withdrawn E[ast] still men on ground on their feet vehicles burning everywhere impossible to tell what is happening. Have got NZ major [Currie?] who tells me they were attacked by lorried inf. Very heavy shelling. Have made ring of tanks and very few people can now get out. Will stay and do what we can but arty fire very heavy, strong enemy posn. NW of here, this place is overlooked on all sides. Do not know what is happening at [Belhamed](#). ¹

He had no thought of counter-attack, since the remnants of the New Zealand Division he could see were very few and in no condition, so far as he could judge, for

anything but a retreat from the ghastly shambles below. In this he was mistaken; but the rear link wireless sets of both 3 and 5 Royal Tanks had broken down and he was out of touch with them.

Gott's conception of the situation, however, was wider of the mark and he signalled back as follows:

Would you be able to get to Bir el Chleta and thence to South?

Gatehouse replied, 'Yes, I think so. I have no information but don't see why not.' Neither of them knew that 21 Panzer lay astride the Trigh Capuzzo to the east, and Gott had in mind the withdrawal of whatever elements of the New Zealand Division Gatehouse could save along this track to Chleta and thence south to the 30 Corps area. His next communication at 10 a.m., however, only confused the issue:

Your first task is to assist NZ that you are doing, secondly destroy any enemy tanks you can find, thirdly to get back S to posn S of SA Bde. In order to do task (1) it is necessary to go to Bir el Chleta.

¹ The messages passed at this stage between Gott and Gatehouse are recorded in the log of 7 Arm'd Div appended to the war diary.

As a guide to action this was not helpful. Gatehouse could not counter-attack the German tanks by moving away from them, nor could he very well bring his reserve tanks, his guns and administrative 'tail' down the escarpment into the Kessel and then march eastwards under the noses of the Italians on Point 175. He therefore rejected the scheme:

No. NZ have left in formed body moving fast E, there are only a few stragglers left here in this leaguer. Am in a very nasty position and cannot possibly tell what is happening to anyone else.

Like the other British armoured commanders, Gatehouse preferred open desert and freedom of manoeuvre, and in the past fortnight he had seen enough of panzer tactics not to want to 'mix it' with [Africa Corps](#) unless the circumstances looked favourable. In this case it appeared that the bulk of the New Zealand Division had

either been overrun or had made its escape eastwards and he saw no point in risking heavy losses in a lost cause. He was nevertheless ready to do anything within reason to help, and when Gott asked, 'If you wait 10 mins will it endanger your command, then I can get orders from above?', Gatehouse replied stoutly:

I will wait here as long as you like and do anything you like. But I have no information and can get none here.

Reasonable though this was from the point of view of an armoured commander who had seen British tank forces dissolve in front of his eyes when they came to grips with German armour, it was radically different from Barrowclough's attitude. As an infantry-man the 6 Brigade Commander attached more importance to vital ground than to mobility, and the plain facts of this case seemed to him to argue unanswerably in favour of counter-attack. He was surprised that there was any hesitation.

The viewpoints of the two brigadiers, when they met at the escarpment, therefore remained poles apart. ¹ Barrowclough knew that the enemy had fewer than forty tanks left and he saw for himself a long line of German infantry stretching towards him from the direction of the Mosque in apathetic fashion, with every indication of distaste for their current role—an impression confirmed by a squadron commander of [3 Royal Tanks](#) who was refused permission to attack and take these men prisoner. ² When Barrowclough saw what looked to be a huge assembly of British armour stretching out around 8 Field Company and compared it in his mind's eye with the German elements he had to contend with near the Trigh Capuzzo, many of them jaded and bedraggled, he was more anxious than ever to stage an immediate counter-attack. This is his version of what ensued:

¹ Gatehouse does not recall meeting Barrowclough at all this day; so there is no account from his side of what passed between him and the Commander of 6 Bde.

² Crisp, pp. 152–3.

I urged him [Gatehouse] to make some effort to recover the prisoners from 4 NZ Bde

and my own 6 Fd Regiment. I explained the weakness of my own forces, but undertook to attack with him and informed him that, from my own observations, the enemy tanks on our front were much fewer than those he commanded. I promised that my infantry would move forward with him and endeavour to cope with enemy anti-tank guns which I knew to be fairly numerous. From the top of the escarpment, there was exceptionally good observation of the enemy positions on the lower ground in the vicinity of the Trigh Capuzzo. ¹

To this Gatehouse replied that he had been sent forward only to cover a withdrawal and 'he did not consider his instructions authorised him to rescue those who had been taken prisoner.' Barrowclough then pointed out that he had not received any orders to withdraw and saw no reason to do so while 4 Armoured Brigade was at hand. Its arrival had 'obviously led the enemy to abandon the attack he had been about to launch.' The answer to this was that Gatehouse's instructions did not allow him to stay in this position and he would therefore have to withdraw whatever the New Zealanders chose to do. This left Barrowclough 'no option but to elect to withdraw to Zaafran where I knew I could join up with Inglis', and the Staff Captain, Weston, ² was instructed to assemble the vehicles. But Gatehouse remained unaware that 4 Brigade or any other part of the New Zealand Division than the few men he could see below remained on the battlefield. The two brigadiers were thus talking at cross purposes.

Had Gatehouse known of the guns below Zaafran which were beginning to pierce the murky haze over Belhamed and pound 15 Panzer, or of the gallant rearguard of 44 Royal Tanks fighting from its ledge on the eastern end of Belhamed, or of the counter-attack which 3 and 5 Royal Tanks were at that very moment preparing, he might have been more receptive to Barrowclough's suggestions. But he knew nothing of these, and he was subject to further instructions from Gott which were hard to follow. He signalled to Gott at 10.31 a.m. as follows:

We have arranged with Brig. Borroclough [sic]. He has said he was going to withdraw at once E. Have warned him of the danger of attack, have heard of 14 M13 coming from W. Am ready for this. Place is being very heavily shelled with very large stuff.

Gatehouse had hitherto operated mainly beyond the range of the German Army

Artillery and had not previously seen anything like the gun fire then falling on 6 Brigade, particularly the 210-millimetre shellbursts. ³ Gott replied at once:

¹ 9 Oct 1950.

² Maj G. C. Weston, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born New Plymouth, 18 Nov 1916; student; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³ 'Of all the many actions in the [Western Desert](#) I have been in,' Drew says, 'I think this was just about the hottest.'

Contact Bernard 2000x [yards] S of [Belhamed](#). Deal with enemy at Pt 175 on your way. Corps Comd wants NZ to join SA this fits your plans. You can cross escarpment to S anywhere E of 450 grid [i.e., Bir Sciafsciuf].

This was puzzling and it is doubtful if Gatehouse understood it, though he replied, 'OK am in the picture'. Gott added a moment later, 'Rally S of Pt 175 when you have done this', which, in conjunction with the previous message, would have meant making a move of many miles eastwards along the Trigh Capuzzo, 'dealing with' Ariete at Point 175 on the way, ascending the escarpment where 1 South African Brigade was, and then carrying on westwards to where 4 Armoured Brigade had laagered the night before. All Gatehouse meant to do, however, was to render what help he could to the New Zealand remnants and then withdraw the whole armoured brigade right away from the treacherous escarpments to some point in the south where it would be free to manoeuvre without restraint of terrain.

While these talks were going on the captive ranks of 20 Battalion were being assembled near the Mosque. Captain Quilter, looking back and hoping like the others for some favourable turn of events which would free him or allow him to escape, saw the British armour descend the escarpment no more than two miles away. 'I anticipated a counter attack by these tanks on [Sidi Rezegh](#) which was very lightly held', he says. 'Nothing developed.'

Patrols from [3 Royal Tanks](#) pushing northwards through the swirling smoke had been halted by anti-tank fire and the whole area was under heavy shellfire. Like

Gatehouse, Drew did not know there were other and stronger friendly forces a short way to the north-east, but he carried on probing until, when his rear link came back in service, he was told that the New Zealanders must all withdraw as soon as possible. He naturally assumed that he was required to retrace his steps, taking the New Zealanders with him, ascend the escarpment, and drive south over the ground across which he had advanced in the early morning.

Further misunderstandings were therefore brewing and they soon became apparent. Drew met Captain Weston, who asked him for instructions 'regarding direction of withdrawal', ¹ and even on this simple matter they failed to see eye to eye. Weston had meant to travel east, but Drew recommended the south, pointing out that Weston's intended route was dominated by Ariete. The result was that Weston began to head up the Rugbet en-Nbeidat in obedience to what he thought Drew meant, though with grave misgivings about the Italians he felt certain covered this route.

¹ Diary of 5 R Tks.

Thus a three-sided tug-o'-war began, Drew wanting to move south, Gott expecting 6 Brigade and 4 Armoured Brigade to move eastwards along the Trigh Capuzzo, and Barrowclough having no thought of withdrawing completely from the battlefield and meaning only to rejoin the rest of the Division at [Zaafran](#). The vehicles had first to be marshalled for the journey in blinding smoke and under heavy fire, in face of an enemy who was quick to follow up. The scattered elements of the brigade covered a wide area and some of them could not be told what was happening. If they did not conform of their own accord they would have to be left behind, and this is what in fact happened to some of 24 Battalion and the B Echelon group of 8 Field Company. The largest detachment in the area below the escarpment, that of 26 Battalion, got away safely; but this seemed to arouse the enemy, and when 21 Battalion followed it came under fierce fire which wounded sixteen men on their way back to their lorries. Many desperate little scenes were enacted when men were hit or lorries set on fire and their passengers had to be transferred; then the lorries began to follow Weston up the Rugbet despite several last-minute efforts to head them off.

The column of vehicles raced over bumpy scrubland at high speed and halfway up the Rugbet came under fire exactly as had been predicted. With one accord the transport turned tail and fled back to the bottom with remarkably little damage and only one casualty. The column then headed north-eastwards and in due course reached [Zaafran](#).

Above the escarpment 25 Battalion and 8 Field Company, ordered to withdraw, were assembling for this purpose when Weston made his spectacular ascent of the Rugbet; they watched it breathlessly, and were greatly relieved when nothing worse came of it. When these vehicles fled towards [Zaafran](#) Major Burton of the 25th prepared to follow, unbeknown to the tank escort, which expected him to move south. But 4 Armoured Brigade at that moment recalled all its tanks to meet a newly-reported threat of tank attack against its headquarters in the area just vacated by 8 Field Company. In their absence Burton led the way down to the Trigh Capuzzo, swung away when the column came under fire from Point 175, and entered the 4 Brigade area in the wake of the main 6 Brigade transport group, with 8 Field Company following in an odd assortment of vehicles (having lost all its own B Echelon).

The threat against which Gatehouse guarded seems to have been inferred from various movements of M13 tanks of Ariete south of Point 175, and German tanks were also reported to be attacking from the south. The British tank regiments therefore went through the familiar routine of adopting hull-down positions and Gatehouse reported back to Gott. One such report at 11.45 a.m. read in part as follows:

Starting evacuating leaguer as arranged. After 2 miles on a point just E of aerodrome, we were attacked by Italian tanks from in front, German tanks on right flank. Coln we were protecting disappeared NE could not protect them as had no contact. Consider responsibility over towards coln. In good posn now hull down, will shoot it out with them if they come on. Will try to rally in area ordered but must deal with tanks first as they are between us and area we want.

There were actually no German tanks to the south and the Italian tanks stayed out of range; but I Battalion, 8 Panzer Regiment, perhaps a dozen tanks all told, was withdrawn in great haste from the western part of [Belhamed](#) to meet what looked

like a serious counter-attack by the British armour. This battalion quickly extended along the eastern flank of 15 Panzer in a defensive role, supported by a battery of 105-millimetre guns south of [Belhamed](#). When 4 Armoured Brigade moved southwards shortly after noon, however, it did so without meeting 'any enemy or being fired on'¹ and at 12.47 p.m. a signal to 7 Armoured Division described the journey as 'very brisk motoring'. Tanks replenished in the new area and the brigade then moved farther south to Bir er-Reghem, where it stayed 'in a position of observation facing North' for the rest of the day, followed by a 12-mile journey to Bir Berraneb to form a night laager.

To the men of 6 Brigade the whole episode was puzzling. They were thankful for the timely help of the Stuart tanks when capture had seemed inevitable and full of admiration for the tank crews who lingered under heavy fire to escort them to safety. But they were mildly surprised that the British armour disappeared so quickly from the scene and disappointed that such a strong force made such a small impression on the battle as a whole. They had expected the tide to turn, but it continued to flow against them.

They would have been even more surprised had they known that 4 Armoured Brigade was under orders to counter-attack the enemy tanks at all costs, which it evidently did not do. In this connection Gott's subsequent orders to Gatehouse were certainly hard to understand and introduced several ambiguities. Brigadier Gatehouse was greatly influenced by the size of the enemy concentration stretching south-westwards from [Sidi Rezegh](#) and the proximity of elements of Ariete, though this division showed no signs of wanting to come to grips with the British armour. He had less to fear than he thought, and it is not flattering to his brigade that the remnants of a German tank battalion could turn about from a very severe action and appear to drive away a fresh British force which outnumbered it in tanks by about nine to one.

¹ Diary of 5 R Tks.

[Zaafan](#), too, when 6 Brigade reached it, was under heavy shellfire; but the guns in the shallow wadi replied with gusto and there was a very different atmosphere from that which had settled over the derelict-strewn ground the 6 Brigade remnants

had left. The situation seemed well under control and the units were left for some time to sort themselves out, and were then sited with the ten anti-tank 2-pounders and two 18-pounders they had brought with them on the thinly-held eastern flank, where the enemy was some way away and unenterprising. There, for an hour or two, they could relax.

vii

Because it was vital to retain firm control of the guns, Colonel Duff could not afford to move with 4 Brigade Headquarters back to [Zaafran](#). To yield this control and sever the intricate telephone and R/T communications while RHQ was on the move would entail great risk. The telephone exchange of 4 Field Regiment had twentyone subscribers—far more than normal resources provided for, so that E Section, Divisional Signals, had to improvise, which it did wonderfully well—and extension telephones had been laid to an emergency RHQ, a hole dug near the office truck in case the latter was hit. For most of the day, however, the staff worked in or near the truck, exposed to fire from most points of the compass.

With a handful of staff Duff now controlled 46 and V/AA Batteries (the latter joined in the morning by C Troop of the 6th Field with welcome reserves of ammunition) in the centre of the wadi, W/X Battery (with two guns of 25 Battery attached) a little to the south-east, 26 Battery in the Sciuearat strongpoint, a collection of guns in anti-tank roles along the western and south-western edge of the wadi, and whatever he could find in the way of makeshift infantry to cover them. In mainly anti-tank roles there were three, and later four, more guns of 25 Battery and four of W/X. In addition, 46 Battery had moved 500 yards eastwards when [Belhamed](#) was lost so as to obtain better anti-tank fields of fire, though it carried on in the meantime in its normal role.

These forty-odd 25-pounders with their dwindling stocks of ammunition were the kingpin of the defence and the confidence reposed in them, as so often in the desert war, was not misplaced. They lacked the range of many of the German guns, their rate of fire was comparatively slow, and as anti-tank guns they were conspicuous and vulnerable; but they were versatile, accurate if well served, and as a final sanction able to fire crushing broadsides of solid shot at tanks which came

close. Here the 3000-odd remaining members of the New Zealand Division clustered on [Zaafran](#) and surrounded by enemy were reassured by their lively and authoritative voices.

The strength of the guns, however, resided as much in the organisation behind them as in their physical characteristics. Though the guns were 'shot' in the main by FOOs who observed the effect on the ground and made corrections, there was not nearly enough ammunition to engage all targets offering, nor could the FOOs on the spot always correctly assess the main danger. All 'shoots' therefore had to be authorised by Duff or his assistants, who plotted targets on the map, logged information, and studied with growing apprehension the ammunition states. It was 1 p.m. by the time RHQ was linked by telephone with 4 Brigade Headquarters in the latter's new site, and until then the artillery network was all that linked the various sectors of the defence. Co-operation between 4 Field Regiment and 8 Field Regiment, RA, was excellent and Major [Mitchell](#),¹ Duff's second-in-command, describes the latter as 'a great team'.

Besides these field guns, Colonel Duff commanded a mixed bag of whatever other troops and equipment he could find to defend the all-important western sector and assembled by degrees three 18-pounders, six Bofors with barrels down ready to fire at tanks, and several 2-pounders extended along perhaps 2000 yards of the south-western edge of the wadi. He made several attempts to obtain infantry to cover these guns but could get for this purpose only a handful of gunners, mainly of 6 Field Regiment and 47 Battery, survivors of the [Belhamed](#) action. The men of 6 Brigade who reached 4 Brigade about midday would have been most welcome on this front, but were committed instead in the east. The inner circle of defences at [Zaafran](#), consisting of the Defence Platoon and a few others, 57 all told, and a detachment of 5 Field Park Company, mostly faced west; but they were well behind the guns.

In the early afternoon W/X Battery fired a few rounds per gun at a group of large lorries approaching the eastern flank. Some of the lorries kept on coming, however, and were found to contain many hundreds of Italians of Ariete who had lost heart and wanted to surrender. Their reception was cool; 4 Brigade had no water or rations to spare and did not want them. Some were persuaded to look elsewhere for relief from hunger, thirst, and the anxieties of battle; but others

remained in the offing intent on becoming prisoners. Beyond Ariete were the guns of 1 South African Brigade and the Jock Columns, and these and the New Zealand guns had been unwittingly playing a kind of table tennis with these Italians, driving them first one side and then the other of the high ground.

¹ Brig J. M. Mitchell, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Port Chalmers, 29 Jun 1904; public servant; CO 7 A-Tk Regt Dec 1941–Dec 1943, May–Oct 1944; OC NZ Tps in Egypt 1945–46.

29

viii

The South Africans had resumed their efforts to seize Point 175 at 5 a.m. and with heavy artillery support drove off elements of 21 Panzer and 3 Reconnaissance Unit and reached the eastern edge of [Wadi esc-Sciomar](#), where the Royal Natal Carbineers were held up by tanks hull-down on the far side. A flanking move to the south by 1 Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles was also halted on the open ground south and south-east of Point 175, and at 11 a.m. 1 Transvaal Scottish moved up between the two. General Norrie remained at hand and was anxious to seize the feature; but this task was beyond the powers of the South Africans without the help of 4 Armoured Brigade. By this time, however, there was little point in trying to break the deadlock. Norrie was told that 'there was no immediate prospect of Pt 175 being captured' ¹ and the New Zealanders evidently could not hold on for long where they were. Communications from [General Freyberg](#) and also from 13 Corps and Army had changed the whole complexion of the battle.

ix

A confusing signal of uncertain origin but probably from Eighth Army was received at New Zealand Battle Headquarters at 9.45 a.m. and reached Norrie some time later. It pointed out that Brigadier Pienaar would come under General Gott's command, and if his attack on Point 175 failed he was to be withdrawn to wherever Gott thought he should go. This was the first indication to Norrie that either 13 Corps or Army was thinking of closing the [Tobruk Corridor](#), a most significant step.

Freyberg, who thought this message was for him, took it that he was expected to withdraw and signalled accordingly to both corps at 10.10 a.m.:

We hung on in hope SA would attack and recapture pt 175 and **SIDI REZEGH** before dawn today without which our position was untenable. This they failed to do. Enemy has attacked and captured our HQ half our arty and divided our force into 2. We hope to reach remnants of 19 Bn at **ZAAFRAN** and extricate remnants of 4 Bde tonight. In view of your 4 of 1 Dec [the signal of uncertain origin] obvious you anticipate withdrawal of remnants which in my opinion inevitable.

Thirtieth Corps did not have the requisite cipher keys, however, Norrie did not receive this message, and he therefore did not learn that **Freyberg** mistakenly inferred from the signal of 9.45 a.m. that he had authority to withdraw.

This was before **Brigadier Inglis** moved his headquarters to **Zaafran**, which occasioned a further break in wireless communications during which **Freyberg** conferred with **Inglis** and Barrowclough and considered what to do. **Inglis** was in favour

¹ Report of 1 SA Bde.

of moving towards **Tobruk**, not realising that the main enemy strength lay between him and Ed Duda, and Barrowclough thought such a move might be possible if attempted under cover of darkness. In the end **Freyberg** decided to move to the south-east, where 7 Armoured Division was expected to be able to afford help. **Freyberg** and Norrie then held another '“veiled” conversation' ¹ by R/T at 1.40 p.m. (which the Germans intercepted and easily understood) in the course of which it became 'as clear as crystal' to Norrie that the New Zealand Division 'would have to be withdrawn'. Norrie asked if **Freyberg** had been authorised to withdraw and **Freyberg** replied that he was 'acting according to instructions.' ² The arrangement made was that 1 South African Brigade would stay where it was until the New Zealanders came through. Gott would meanwhile arrange with Army to send supplies to **Bir Gibni**, the starting point of the Division when it set out on its crusader

adventures ten days before, and the New Zealanders would replenish there.

No times were settled and it was left open to [Freyberg](#) to move when he thought fit to do so. About 2 p.m. he went over to tell [Inglis](#) to be ready to move to Bir Sciafsciuf in an hour's time. In the ensuing discussion it was agreed that the Division in its present shape could not hope to fight its way through in broad daylight. The only hope was that the gunners might hold off until dark the attack which was clearly threatening from the west. There would then be fair prospects of reaching Bir Sciafsciuf.

Requests had already been made through the Air Support Control tentacle to obtain [RAF](#) support, and about 4 p.m. two squadrons of Maryland bombers dropped their bombs with such precision that only one or two fell among the gunners in the wadi. The original bomb line given by 4 Brigade had been too far east, the staff not realising that the guns were so far away, and it had hastily been corrected to another grid 1000 metres to the west. Even so, Ling's Matildas and some FOOs were west of the new bomb line and one of the latter was killed. But the Division gained an invaluable reprieve as bombs exploded among enemy forming up for the attack.

Co-operation between air and ground troops on the enemy side was less effective. Bombing was called for on [Zaafran](#), and 90 Light Division recorded seeing the British positions there bombed by Stukas at 4.10 p.m. But 4 Brigade was not bombed and an FOO of 7 Medium Regiment, RA, 'reported with glee' according to the regimental history (page 44) 'that he had just seen an enemy column bombed by both our bombers and German Stukas.' The diary of 15 Panzer reports heavy air raids 'causing casualties to men and MT'.

¹ Norrie, 'Narrative of Events'.

² Pz Gp Intelligence diary.

x

General Cruewell had gone to General Neumann-Silkow's headquarters soon after midday and ordered 15 Panzer to carry the attack eastwards over [Zaafran](#) to

link up with 21 Panzer and 'close in the ring round the enemy', but 8 Panzer Regiment had to refuel and replenish its ammunition, 200 Regiment had to be withdrawn from [Belhamed](#), where its 2 MG Battalion was digging in facing 18 Battalion, and 33 Artillery Regiment had to be redispersed to support the renewed attack. Neumann-Silkow therefore fixed 4.30 p.m. as the starting time and the [RAF](#) bombing raids were thus delivered most opportunely.

xi

Duff had been called to a conference at 4 Brigade Headquarters at 3.35 p.m. and there told to be ready to move eastwards at 5.30. An hour later he had gathered his battery commanders together at his own headquarters to issue orders for this move; but the discussion, as his report says, was 'continually interrupted by very heavy and very close 5.9 fire' and all realised they would have to make a fighting withdrawal. There would therefore be no hope of assembling the whole group as an entity before moving off, and Duff merely explained where he wanted the batteries to travel in the brigade group columns and told them to find their own ways to their allotted stations.

The gun lines, however, were too vulnerable for even this simple programme and the attack by 15 Panzer when it came caused an immediate crisis along almost the whole length of the wadi, though the superb battle discipline of the RA gunners did not betray this. Most guns reverted to Gun Control and their crews engaged tanks and infantry over open sights, firing AP (so long as it lasted) at the tanks and HE (if there was time to choose) at the infantry. Tanks appeared at the mouth of the wadi and tried to drive up it, to be met by withering fire from 46 Battery and Q Troop's 18-pounders which turned them back amid clouds of dust and smoke. Other tanks appeared almost at once on the south-eastern slopes of [Belhamed](#) and the gun crews swung their trails round quickly to engage them. All guns within reach blazed away furiously—the 25-pounders of both regiments, the three 18-pounders, and the Bofors—until the tanks again fell back. But the enemy infantry held the guns under MG and mortar fire which was hard to deal with, though fortunately inaccurate.

One cause of this inaccuracy was the fire of the five Matildas of 44 Royal Tanks which remained in working order. These had withdrawn to the wadi to replenish

ammunition and while there had been ordered by [Freyberg](#) to take their places at the head of the Divisional columns for the break-out to the east; but Captains Lee and Ling of the regiment conspired to disobey this order. They had heard from Captain Williamson, who now commanded the I tanks, that '15 German tanks ... were nearly on top of them' and ordered him back into action at the western side of the wadi. There the tanks stayed until sunset, keeping back German tanks and offering fierce opposition to the infantry. Though the I tanks afterwards had to be guided slowly, with the aid of many flares, to the Divisional assembly area, keeping everybody tensely waiting, Lee and Ling were convinced they had done the right thing and that 44 Royal Tanks had made a valuable and perhaps decisive contribution to the security of the whole force. A smaller but also valuable effort was made by two Vickers guns of 5 MG Platoon which Lieutenant Lee sited expressly to cover the guns, and which fired continuously at the critical stage before the sun went down. Lee himself moved to the south, still trying to help the gunners, and there received fatal wounds.

Volunteers were never lacking to take over when members of gun crews were hit and two guns of C Troop, 25 Battery, were manned at the height of the action by scratch crews, one under Lieutenant [Nathan](#) ¹ and the other under Sergeant [Lindsay](#). ² More men were hit and replaced, and at the climax of the action the two guns were firing at almost point-blank range at 'lorried infantry and armoured cars as they came over the crest'. The time had come to withdraw, and out of the corners of their eyes Nathan's and Lindsay's men saw crews of 8 Field Regiment in thrilling cameos, framed in smoke, of parade-ground drill. At the appropriate moment Lindsay's driver, waiting with his engine running, came forward when called and the gun was hooked on and driven off almost under the noses of the enemy. A short distance away Lindsay called a halt and hooked on behind the gun an abandoned gun limber. It seemed to him that one gun of D Troop, W/X Battery, stayed behind to cover his withdrawal, and that this gun and its crew were lost.

In this turmoil two guns, one each of A and C Troops, 25 Battery, kept firing over open sights, manned by the survivors of four gun crews, until there was almost no hope of withdrawing the guns. The setting sun glared for a few painful minutes in the gunners' eyes and then sank below the horizon. Behind them the shell-torn wadi was the scene of much activity as the last vehicles hastened to get away eastwards,

speeded by enemy fire. Then an A Troop officer came forward, told his crew to 'leave the gun and get out', and

¹ Maj E. C. W. Nathan; Wellington; born NZ 28 Feb 1911; stockbroker.

² WO II H. C. Lindsay, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 9 Jan 1915; engine driver; twice wounded.

the men left on foot, taking with them dial sight and firing mechanism. That left only the C Troop gun, which the officer did not see and which was now manned by only two men, Lance-Bombardier Gay ¹ and Gunner Whitehead. ² These two waited and waited for their gun tractor to arrive; but no quad came, and indeed it would have been suicidal to try to get the gun out at this stage. With the enemy on three sides at point-blank range, the two men in the end removed the instruments from the gun C4, which they had served well and which they were loath to leave, and trudged back in the gathering dusk towards Zaafran.

Nearer the mouth of the wadi three more guns, the 18-pounders of Q Troop, continued to speak out firmly, their flashes streaking out farther and farther into the twilight, and ceased fire only when it was 'too dark to pick out targets'. ³ They had to avenge a gun lost that morning on the way to Belhamed and counted their score in the end as six tanks knocked out. When they finally drove back to Zaafran they brought to a close an artillery action as memorable in its way as the last stand of 6 Field Regiment and tactically even more important.

The attack halted at nightfall and the diary of 15 Panzer blames this, as often before, on an 'erroneous order from Pz Gp'. Cruewell when he heard of it was angry and signalled to Neumann-Silkow at 11.30 p.m. in these words:

I have always named Zaafran as your objective. I know of no order to halt at [Point] 145. Move on to Zaafran at daybreak and capture it.

The report of 8 Panzer Regiment also states that a halt was called when the division was still three kilometres short of Zaafran; but 2 MG Battalion talks of 'continuous shell and anti-tank fire until dusk' and took up all-round defensive positions after

dark, having succeeded, as it thought, in an attack against 'an enemy far superior in numbers and possessing every topographical advantage.' The report of 15 Motor Cycle Battalion merely says that 'it was no use going on any farther in the dark'. Those in the van of the attack were only too ready to settle down for the night; they had had enough.

xii

At the Scieuarat strongpoint 26 Battery and some guns of 65 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, assisted by one or two damaged Valentines of 8 Royal Tanks, fought an action of their own against 21 Panzer which kept the 25-pounders busy until dark and made them late for their rendezvous at the Divisional assembly area. Things might

¹ L-Bdr K. Gay; Millerton; born NZ 31 Jul 1909; labourer.

² Sgt B. P. K. Whitehead; Palmerston North; born Wellington, 31 Jul 1913; NZR employee; wounded Mar 1943.

³ Lt B. Gapes.

have been much worse, but the panzers showed great reluctance to come close and were in the first instance diverted by an I-tank thrust mounted on General Norrie's orders by six Valentines which happened to be at Bir Sciafsciuf.

General Boettcher, the new GOC of 21 Panzer, had been ordered to attack westwards in conjunction with the attack on Zaafran by 15 Panzer; but his division was in poor shape and made no attempt to attack the main New Zealand concentration. Instead II Battalion of 104 Infantry Regiment advanced westwards above the escarpment, brushing past Ariete, while 8 MG Battalion pushed along the foot of the escarpment, taking cover frequently and making little progress until after dark. Ahead of the machine-gunners the twelve remaining German tanks and one captured Stuart of 5 Panzer Regiment showed slightly more enterprise. The six Valentines attacked from Sciafsciuf, disabling the Stuart and another German tank,

and the rest of the panzers quickly disappeared over the escarpment, reappearing farther west and working their way at high speed round to the western side of the Sciearat strongpoint so that the setting sun was behind them. None of the six Valentines, however, returned from this skirmish. For a few minutes there was a lively exchange of fire between 26 Battery and the German tanks, but the latter came no closer than 1100 yards and 26 Battery was able to disengage at 6 p.m. and move off three-quarters of an hour later, catching up with the Divisional columns a few miles eastwards on the Trigh Capuzzo.

Vehicles had started moving to the New Zealand assembly area before dark, but the first of them, elements of 6 Brigade, were shelled and had to disperse again for a short time. They reassembled with the rest of the Division soon afterwards, however, and the whole force formed up for the night march in nine columns with C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry (in lieu of the I tanks), leading 4 Brigade, followed by Divisional Battle Headquarters and then 6 Brigade, with 25 Battalion at the rear. The I tanks and the last of the guns later took up position on the right flank.

The starting line had been chosen by [Brigadier Inglis](#) in the course of a reconnaissance with his IO, Captain Beale. A gap of about 2000 yards in the enemy positions to the east was thought to exist and [Inglis](#) hoped to drive through it. He therefore told Beale to set out flags for a distance of about a mile southwards from the escarpment between [Zaafran](#) and [Ed Dbana](#). Beale reached the appointed line and put the northern flag into position, but 1000 yards to the south he came under close-range fire and retreated hastily. There was no hope of marking the southern boundary, and when the light began to fade at 5 p.m. Beale simply placed members of his 'I' Section at intervals along the starting line as markers for the Divisional Cavalry, which duly formed up behind them. The remainder of the 700 vehicles of the Division, other than those still involved in the fighting, lined up at their allotted stations with impressive discipline, and soon after 5.30 p.m. the whole mass was in orderly columns ready to move off. The assembly looked like a well-rehearsed drill and it was hard to credit that it took place under fire and within sight of enemy. The pause of about an hour which followed as the Division waited for the tanks and guns to arrive was a stern test of morale. Then Beale led off about 6.45 p.m. in his PU truck showing one rear light and the mass began to move.

The plotted course ran for three miles almost due east and then south to Bir

Sciafsciuf. Flares rising straight ahead, however, were evidently enemy and there were more of the same kind to the south, so that columns had to drive between them. Back on the correct compass bearing the same flares were seen along the right flank and it was well past the appointed end of the 'first leg' that the Division headed south across the Trigh Capuzzo. Red flares fired above the escarpment (on General Norrie's instructions) guided the leaders in and contact was soon established with the Transvaal Scottish of 1 South African Brigade, not at Sciafsciuf but south of Bir el Chleta. Mayfield Column and A Squadron, [11 Hussars](#), were nearby and in a matter of minutes [Freyberg](#) went forward and met General Norrie. The GOC of 30 Corps had already gathered from his R/T conversations that [Freyberg](#) 'in spite of his adversities' was 'cool, calm and collected and in remarkable spirits'; now he saw for himself the remnants of the division on which his thoughts had centred for the past thirty-six hours and he was 'much impressed by the discipline of the N.Z. tps.'¹

It was a momentous meeting and brought to an end the main operations of the New Zealand Division in
crusader

campaign, as well as coinciding with other moves by 30 Corps which in effect conceded victory to the enemy in the second phase of the campaign. The main body of 1 South African Brigade had already moved back to Taieb el-Esem and at midnight the Transvaal Scottish followed. With 4 Armoured Brigade at Bir Berraneb, 30 Corps thus moved beyond striking distance of the main enemy forces, though by withdrawing southwards towards the FMCs rather than towards the frontier Norrie would be, as he says, 'in a position to resume the offensive at the shortest possible moment.' There seemed little likelihood of renewing the attack in the near future; but a message from Gott asked him to return to 30 Corps Headquarters south of the Trigh el-Abd by 9 a.m. next day at the latest as there were fresh instructions from General Ritchie. Some new development had

¹ 'Narrative of Events'.

evidently occurred and, when the New Zealand Division departed for the Egyptian frontier, Norrie took his small staff back to his Main Headquarters to find

out what was afoot.

Before the New Zealand Division moved on, Captain Ling of 44 Royal Tanks asked for permission to stay behind, as his few tanks were badly in need of overhaul. This was granted and his little party with a few essential vehicles went into close laager for the rest of the night. They were the last (except for two Valentines which stayed with the Division and about sixteen damaged tanks in [Tobruk](#)) of the I tanks which had supported the Division throughout the battle and had saved many New Zealand lives, and it was not without some qualms that they were left behind in what promised to be enemy territory next day.

Not a shot had been fired at the Division in the course of the withdrawal from [Zaafran](#) and the rest of the journey was so uneventful that, except for the drivers, most of the men slept through it. The night was cold and at [Bir Gibni](#), which they reached about 3.30 a.m. on 2 December, the men hastened to bed down and resume their sleep. The last vehicle to arrive was a massive Italian lorry and trailer loaded with 50–60 men who insisted on their right to be taken prisoner and thereby be absolved from the duty of putting up any more with the hardships of battle. They required no guards and in the morning they followed the Division back towards Egypt. ¹

¹ The following units and detachments were represented in whole or part among the 3500 men and 700 vehicles in this force:

Battle HQ

HQ 4 and 6 Bdes

C Sqn, Div Cav

8 R Tks (two tanks)

44 R Tks (admin. transport)

4 and 6 Fd Regts, 8 Fd Regt, RA, and 47 Fd Bty

31, 33 and 34 Btys, 7 A-Tk Regt

41 and 43 Btys, 14 LAA Regt

65 A-Tk Regt, RA (less one bty)

1 Survey Tp

5 Fd Park Coy

6 and 8 Fd Coys

Battle HQ Sigs and E, J and L Sections Div Sigs, and two tentacles of T
Air Support Control Sigs

19 Bn (Zaaforce)

20 Bn (admin. transport)

21, 24, 25 and 26 Bns

2 and 3 Coys, 27 MG Bn

4 Fd Amb (ADS)

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 25 – PLODDING ON WESTWARDS

CHAPTER 25

Plodding on Westwards

i

THE retreat from [Zaafran](#) by no means ended the New Zealand interest in crusader. More than 1000 New Zealanders remained in the Corridor (18 Battalion, half of the 19th, and many gunners), another 3500 (apart from wounded) were within [Tobruk](#) fortress, over 3200 were in 5 Brigade outside [Bardia](#), and hundreds of patients and staff were still in the captured New Zealand MDS.

The main fighting strength was in 5 Brigade, which had spent three uneventful days after [Africa Corps](#) left the frontier area and now prepared, as the rest of the Division withdrew, for a new phase of operations. Enemy armour had departed on 27 November and on the 28th it was evident to 23 and 28 Battalions at [Capuzzo](#) and Upper Sollum that enemy activity was much reduced. With promises by W/T that 4 Indian Division would soon send urgently-needed food and ammunition, they continued to hold their two-battalion front. At Menastir, however, the enemy was more active and 22 Battalion, which was out of touch with the rest of 5 Brigade, felt itself threatened by much enemy movement which it could not oppose for lack of ammunition. There were many mouths to feed and almost no rations left, and the situation was becoming desperate when a Divisional Cavalry patrol came in and reported that 4 Indian Divisional Headquarters was at the Omars. Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew therefore decided to withdraw the whole battalion group there, get the wounded and prisoners and the many fortuitously attached troops off his hands, and obtain supplies and fresh orders.

This the battalion group did, assembling its 220-odd vehicles ¹ and driving southwards after dark on the 28th. Enemy flares still rose from [Sidi Azeiz](#) and from [Bir Ghirba](#) and the columns drove between them, halting at 2.30 a.m. on the 29th at Point 201, five miles north of the Omars, in contact with Divisional Cavalry. Later in the morning Lieutenant-Colonel Nicoll of that regiment arrived

¹ Including the following:

22 Bn

28 Fd Bty, less E Tp

F A-Tk Tp

Half D LAA Tp

3 Sec, 7 Fd Coy

4 MG Coy

Part of Div Amn Coy and 309 Gen Transport Coy, RASC

B Echelons of Div Cav and 34 A-Tk Bty

`RAF, YMCA & AIF' (22 Bn diary)

with orders from Messervy for Andrew to assume command of the brigade, form a headquarters, and hold a line from [Capuzzo](#) to Upper Sollum.

This was as General Ritchie had stipulated, in the mistaken belief that [Africa Corps](#) was still being supplied mainly from [Bardia](#). Ritchie commented regarding the frontier situation on 28 November that, contrary to his previous suppositions, 5 New Zealand Brigade 'was no longer masking [Bardia](#) at all'. ¹ Now, when the panzer troops were miles away and one brigade was more than enough for the 'masking' role, he wanted Messervy to commit 5 Indian Brigade as well for this purpose. The New Zealanders were to guard one half of the [Bardia](#) perimeter and the Indians the other half.

Unexpectedly stubborn resistance to a final attack on the enemy pocket in the western part of Libyan Omar on 30 November delayed this redeployment, as one of the battalions involved, 3/1 Punjab, was from 5 Indian Brigade. The Punjabis suffered 105 casualties in the course of bitter fighting in which all but one stubborn centre of resistance fell by the end of the day and 170 prisoners were taken. The remainder of the enemy, some 80–100 men, slipped away in the night and were rounded up by armoured cars next day. The hard core of Germans, 12 Oasis Company, had kept the main strength of 7 [Indian Brigade](#) occupied for three days after [Africa Corps](#) left the area, serving Rommel well.

On 1 and 2 December 5 New Zealand Brigade ² was relieved by the Indians in its positions from [Capuzzo](#) to Upper Sollum and took up new stations covering the [Via Balbia](#) west of [Bardia](#), with 23 Battalion nearest to the fortress, 22 Battalion in its former positions at [Menastir](#), and 28 Battalion farther west. Divisional Cavalry patrolled westwards. The main object was to stop supplies from [Bardia](#) reaching [Africa Corps](#) and for this purpose 23 Battalion was to the forefront, backed by the 22nd and with the Maoris in reserve to the west. Since the boot was on the other foot, however, and the enemy's wish was to send supplies to and not from [Bardia](#), the significance of these dispositions was in practice reversed. Colonel Andrew was also expected to make up mobile columns with cavalry, guns and infantry to operate energetically along the [Via Balbia](#), in conjunction with similar columns from 5 Indian Brigade centred on the Trigh Capuzzo to the south, to disrupt the enemy's communications and supplies.

¹ Eighth Army Report.

² With a small HQ in which the main appointments were:

Bde Comd Lt-Col L. W. Andrew, VC

BM [Capt J. L. MacDuff](#) (22 Bn)

Staff Capt A/ [Capt F. Vernon](#) (23 Bn)

IO [Lt E. A. McPhail](#) (23 Bn)

[Maj A. W. Greville](#) took command of 22 Bn. A brigade signals section was hastily improvised from the various elements of Div Sigs at the Wire on 2 Dec and sent to replace losses in 5 Bde.

ii

The heavy losses, particularly in I tanks, which had been incurred in attacking the Omars, had made further efforts to reduce the frontier strongpoints out of the question for some time and it became apparent to Eighth Army and [Middle East Command](#) that it was extravagant to retain mobile troops there in a static role guarding non-mobile enemy. Thus it was decided to send forward [2 South African Division](#), which was neither equipped nor trained for mobile operations, to relieve the Indians and New Zealanders in the frontier area so that, when their deficiencies

of transport were made up, they could take part in the main battle.¹ Already 11 Indian Brigade had been released from the coast sector and was assembled south of the Omars in Army Reserve. The 5th Indian and 5th New Zealand Brigades would follow in due course, and later 7 Indian Brigade (which had suffered much loss at the Omars).

Defence of the rear areas, the RAF landing grounds, and the FMCs absorbed many trained troops, including 22 Guards Brigade, and Middle East Command also prepared other formations to take over these tasks, the newly-formed 38 Indian Brigade and 150 Brigade (of 50 Division from Cyprus) among them. The already numerous reconnaissance troops of Eighth Army, moreover, were to be augmented by the Royal Dragoons from Syria and 12 Royal Lancers (from the newly-arrived 1 Armoured Division). The farreaching administrative work which made these troops available was as important to the outcome of the campaign as the actual conduct of the fighting, and in the end it was the possession of these reserves which turned the scales in Eighth Army's favour. Looking ahead, Ritchie hoped to free 22 Guards Brigade for an action in the Benghazi area like that at Beda Fomm a year earlier; but Rommel's troops were to offer no such opportunity as General Graziani's army had offered.

The main battle, however, had first to be won. After visiting Tobruk, Ritchie had concluded on 30 November that more troops would be needed to help the depleted New Zealand Division to 'clear up Tobruk'.² Next morning he despatched 11 Indian Brigade with one I-tank squadron on the first stage of its journey to 30 Corps and then went in person to Corps Headquarters. Both Gott and Norrie were away, and in their absence Ritchie studied the situation, learned that the enemy armour was 'lying surrounded by a/tk guns in the valley between Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed', and laid it down that 30 Corps must draw it out 'into the open' and 'never leave it alone'.³ News had reached 30 Corps that the enemy

¹ A matter on which Freyberg's consent should not have been taken for granted. See pp. 515–18.

² Eighth Army Report.

had seized [Belhamed](#) and that 4 Armoured Brigade had abandoned its efforts to help the New Zealand Division. The main objects were still to destroy the enemy armour and to relieve [Tobruk](#); but the armoured commanders did not feel inclined to seek out the panzers, covered by anti-tank guns in their presumed lair among the escarpments.

Ritchie thought that the panzers might be persuaded to sally forth without these guns—an eventuality of the kind rudely remarked on in Shaw's *Pygmalion*—and he proposed to draw them out by changing the Schwerpunkt of his attack from [Sidi Rezegh](#) to [El Adem](#), perhaps by launching 'a night approach and assault' by 11 Indian Brigade to occupy this area. What the New Zealand Division with two regiments of I tanks, three field regiments, and two infantry brigades had failed to achieve was now to be attempted a few miles farther west by one brigade with one squadron of Valentines and other hastily assembled supporting arms, a risky enterprise in which the Indian brigade would need all possible help from the British armour.

Leaving his fresh instructions and a letter for General Norrie, Ritchie flew back to Army Headquarters, where he met General Auchinleck, who, sensing a crisis, had flown up from [Cairo](#). Auchinleck was pleased to find that Ritchie took a cheerful view and they agreed that 'the enemy was hard pressed and would be defeated if we continued to give him no rest'. ¹ Vigorous use of armoured-car units and other light mobile forces was therefore encouraged to harass the enemy's rear; but the British armoured cars were too lightly armed and armoured to achieve much and field or anti-tank guns could only be despatched with them at the expense of the main forces, which still had to win their battle. One such raid was made this day, 1 December, by 4 South African Armoured Car Regiment, and in his report Ritchie describes this as 'most successful'; but it was in fact a costly failure. Colonel Newton-King's squadrons, forced to turn back under heavy air attack long before they reached their objectives in the [Acroma](#), [Gazala](#) and [Tmimi](#) areas, suffered heavy casualties and returned on 2 December minus several armoured cars and many other vehicles. ² Ritchie recommended further raids in these areas in an order timed 9.35 p.m. on the 1st and reaffirmed the Jock Column policy for the Support Group,

with the enthusiastic approval of Auchinleck.³ These columns were to harass 'all enemy movement' and 'prevent enemy armour operating in the general area South of the Escarpments', the latter a task quite beyond the strength of such forces.

¹ Auchinleck's despatch.

² See Agar-Hamilton and Turner, pp. 433–6. Ritchie could not have had access to South African sources.

³ See Connell, p. 393, for a most revealing statement of Auchinleck's views.

From all this it emerges clearly that the continued policy of Eighth Army, even with the firm hand of Auchinleck behind it, was to disperse its efforts and break up its divisions into brigade groups, and even battalion groups, operating independently and offering [Africa Corps](#) repeated opportunities to defeat them in detail as it had been doing for the past fortnight. If General Rommel concentrated his shrinking resources and timed his blows well he could continue to deal with Eighth Army a brigade or a battalion at a time and it was important not to give him the chance. The essential tactical situation remained so obscure to those on the British side who were concerned with the higher conduct of the battle, however, that they acquiesced in a move—to give up what was left of the [Tobruk Corridor](#)—which would swiftly have yielded victory to Rommel and ended the crusader offensive. It took the initiative of an English battalion commander viewing with a calm eye his local scene to halt this irrevocable step. For an hour or two the fate of crusader trembled on the balance; then it settled evenly and the issue remained open for a day or two longer. The next time the balance trembled, it was towards the other side.

iii

To Rommel it seemed that with the departure of the New Zealand remnants from [Zaafran](#) he had won his second victory of the campaign and the relief of [Tobruk](#), which had come perilously close to being accomplished, now seemed as far off as ever. It was Rommel's turn to be relieved and it made him a trifle light-headed. On the surface this victory had been gained by the unified efforts under

Cruewell's command of both panzer divisions, Ariete, Mickl Group (formerly Boettcher Group), and 90 Light Division, with some support from other Italian formations and the Army Artillery (and relentless pressure from Rommel). After his headquarters was overrun by 6 Brigade on 23 November, however, Cruewell had too few resources to conduct operations on this scale effectively and the success was actually gained largely by 15 Panzer.

This magnificent fighting machine was now threatening to break down and 21 Panzer and 90 Light both needed a complete overhaul. Thus Rommel would have to make more use than hitherto of his Italian troops. Of these only Ariete and Trieste were mobile, and the former therefore reverted to the command of 20 Italian Mobile Corps so as to constitute once more a force independent of Africa Corps for mobile operations.

Rommel's insistent worries about the supply of the frontier garrisons, which had already clouded his judgment and led him into a chapter of errors, prompted him even before Belhamed fell on 1 December to order 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions to prepare strong columns to travel along the Via Balbia and Trigh Capuzzo at the earliest possible moment. As part of the same programme he ordered General Gambaro to advance eastwards with Ariete and Trieste to the Sollum front, there to fight another battle of encirclement and annihilation. As the Belhamed battle lagged behind schedule he grew more and more impatient to get it finished and start this next phase.

This would not leave him much strength on the Tobruk front, where the Italian formations were stretched taut by the greatly enlarged perimeter and threatened to snap under the strain with calamitous consequences. What was supposed to be a joint effort by Trento and 90 Light in the morning of 1 December to break right through the Corridor from opposite sides had turned out to be ineffective on the German side, and on the Italian side came to nothing at all. To forestall a rupture of the siege front Rommel knew he had to force the garrison back from Ed Duda to the original perimeter; and this, too, he felt could not wait and would have to be done at once.

A third urgent task was to withdraw and overhaul practically all the tanks of Africa Corps, which he ordered to be done as soon as Zaafran was captured early on

2 December. Without these tanks neither of the other two projects had even a remote chance of success, and his insistence on attempting all three at once was an indication that his grip of the situation as a whole was again slipping. His worries about the frontier garrisons were exaggerated, and Cruewell in any case pointed out that the proposed columns from the panzer divisions would be not nearly strong enough; but Rommel had made up his mind and there was no arguing with him.

iv

Meanwhile 70 Division faced another crisis. General Scobie had been much concerned at the deterioration of the situation on 30 November which threatened to leave him holding a 17-mile-long appendix to his original perimeter against the full weight of Panzer Group Africa with little or no help from 30 Corps or the remnants of the New Zealand Division. His fruitless effort to open up the north-eastern shoulder of the Corridor, unluckily directed at stubborn strongpoints of 90 Light, had indicated that the enemy siege troops were not as near to collapse as he had thought. In the circumstances it was easy to forget that the defences of Ed Duda had been greatly strengthened, so that few anti-tank guns remained guarding any other part of the perimeter, and the garrison artillery could now give that key position far better cover than before. A renewal of an attack which had failed when Ed Duda was much weaker was accordingly less to be feared. But the responsibility of defending [Tobruk](#) was a heavy one and Scobie and Godwin-Austen decided that the Corridor might have to be given up if the New Zealand Division failed to hold its ground. Prospects of a successful New Zealand defence against the panzer counter-attacks faded in the night 30 November/1 December and 13 Corps expected [Freyberg](#) to withdraw, as he had been authorised to do. Godwin-Austen therefore signalled to Eighth Army at 7.55 a.m. on 1 December as follows:

1st South African Bde failed to reach Pt 175 and corridor defences may be threatened. Consider it may be necessary to withdraw to original perimeter. Estimate 'I' tanks number 20. Further offensive action 70th Div would dangerously weaken garrison. Request staff officer be sent to decide.

Godwin-Austen and Scobie certainly did not realise that in giving up this vital ground and allowing the enemy once again to use the By-pass road and the Trigh Capuzzo at the Ed Duda bottleneck they would in effect be bringing the crusader

offensive to an end. Nor, when they considered this signal in the evening, did this point strike Ritchie and Auchinleck. But it was obvious that if Ed Duda were given up Ritchie's difficulties would increase, and Eighth Army replied to 13 Corps at 7.55 p.m. (twelve hours later) as follows:

To continue to hold Ed Duda appendix will materially assist future ops for relief of **TOBRUK** which are being planned now. You are however sole judge of whether any such positions are too exposed to offer reasonable likelihood of successful and prolonged resistance for at least a week and you may therefore adjust the defence of the appendix as you consider necessary even so far as to withdraw to the original perimeter.

Long before this reached 13 Corps plans had been outlined to withdraw from Ed Duda, and it was not until word of this reached the ears of Lieutenant-Colonel Nichols of 1 Essex that the scheme met with its just desserts. The acting second-in-command of the battalion, Major J. F. Higson, received a message from 70 Division 'to the effect that it was considered that Ed Duda would shortly become untenable and that we were to make plans for withdrawal back within the **Tobruk** defences.' Higson told Nichols, who at once replied:

Take a message—

Ed Duda growing stronger every hour, feel confident we can resist attack from any quarter. Strongly deplore any suggestion of withdrawal.

Scobie therefore gave up all thought of yielding Ed Duda and replied: 'Greatly admire your spirit', and Higson concludes that 'whether the main forces would have ever linked up with **Tobruk** had the Germans been in force on Ed Duda is very problematical.' ¹ How little need there really was to withdraw at this time may be inferred from the diary of Dudaforce of 19 Battalion, which has the following entry for 1 December:

The day proved uneventful apart from shelling and our troops took the opportunity of improving and consolidating their positions. In the evening they laid mines and put wire outside their defences.

Thus Ed Duda was not given up; but shellfire on this feature was heavy and remained so for two or three days. On the saddle between there and [Belhamed](#) 18 New Zealand Battalion repulsed a light and poorly-staged attack (by Kolbeck Battalion, an ad hoc unit of 90 Light) after dark on 1 December and helped to defeat a much heavier attack next morning. This came mainly against 1 Bedfords and Herts to the left rear, and this unit drove the enemy northwards in considerable disorder. In the course of this fighting it became apparent that the morale of General Suemmermann's troops had deteriorated and their offensive potential was now negligible. Kolbeck Battalion suffered crippling loss in men and equipment, and 605 Anti-Tank Battalion, 900 Engineer Battalion, and III Battalion of 347 Infantry Regiment met with some loss, particularly in anti-tank weapons. To 18 Battalion, on the other hand, the action was salutary; it cost only seven casualties against many times that number of Germans killed, wounded or captured and helped to restore any confidence that had been shaken by the fighting on [Belhamed](#). In the afternoon another attack seemed likely from the east and Colonel Peart hastened to strengthen his anti-tank defences. He was allotted two anti-tank guns manned by Poles, five I tanks came from Ed Duda, and 1 RHA arranged a defensive fire plan. But no attack took place and the night 2–3 December was quiet. Eighteenth Battalion remained, like 1 Bedfords and Herts, under the command of 14 Infantry Brigade, and to Peart's right rear the nearest troops were elements of 2/13 Australian Battalion, then Dudaforce of 19 Battalion and 1 Essex and more Australians, supported by 4 Royal Tanks.

More than 3500 officers and men of the New Zealand Division remained within the fortress and 850 New Zealand vehicles, and they did all they could to help. The NZASC companies provided working parties at the ammunition depot and the docks, Workshops and Ordnance Field Park overhauled vehicles, and the Salvage Unit for the first time found plenty of work to do. The NZA elements found there were more guns in [Tobruk](#), many of them captured

¹ Quoted by Martin, pp. 88–9. Rommel would doubtless have concurred. Higson gives the date as 29 Nov but it must have been 1 Dec. Nichols's immediate superior, Lt-Col O'Carroll of 4 R Tks, warmly supported him.

from the enemy, than there were men to man them, and a field battery was formed under Major Snadden and an LAA battery under Major [Bretherton](#).¹ The field battery had five 25-pounders of the 6th Field, four German 105-millimetre gun-howitzers, and four Italian '75s', an odd mixture. The LAA battery had nine Bofors manned by New Zealanders plus two existing RA troops, each with five Breda LAA guns, and it took up positions guarding the landing grounds at El Gubbi, where it was kept busy opposing Stuka raids.

Most of the New Zealand administrative troops in the fortress, however, were not really needed there. When Ritchie's new plan to relieve [Tobruk](#) became known and it was learned that the rest of the New Zealand Division (other than 5 Brigade) had returned to [Baggush](#), it was therefore decided that all but the fighting troops would be evacuated as soon as possible, preferably by land. If by sea, then the transport would have to be left behind, a most unwelcome prospect. The New Zealand field battery was particularly needed to support a further sortie planned to help a 30 Corps thrust towards [El Adem](#) and Snadden began to train his men for this. Once again, however, the enemy moved first.

vi

As early as 8.30 a.m. on 1 December Rommel called at Cruewell's headquarters, pointed out that the British were 'trying to starve out the [Sollum](#) front, which has food for only 2 days', and added that to relieve this front 'it is absolutely necessary to make a push, at least with a strong advance guard.' This is according to the [Africa Corps](#) diary, and the orderly officer completed the record of Rommel's remarks as follows:

Otherwise the enemy will bring up every negro from South Africa and clean up our people. [Trieste](#) will push along the escarpment to join Ariete and hammer the enemy attacking from the east. [Africa Corps](#) must then push forward in the north towards [Halfaya](#), probably on 2 Dec.

At 5.40 p.m. Rommel added a few further details. After emptying the Kessel Cruewell was to

Take food to [Bardia](#). Keep close touch with Gambara Corps. 90 Lt Div under [[Africa](#)] Corps command. 33 Recce Unit still under Pz Gp command, but would probably move ahead of Gambara Corps next day. At least a division of Gambara Corps would advance south of the Trigh Capuzzo. Objective Sidi Omar, to bottle up the enemy....

This was the mixture very much as before except that Gambara Corps was to take the route followed on 24 November by [Africa Corps](#), which would now travel by way of the Trigh Capuzzo and the [Via Balbia](#). But this time Rommel did not lead the way himself, which was just as well for him.

¹ [Maj J. A. Bretherton](#), ED; [Christchurch](#); born [Wellington](#), 2 Jun 1911; barrister and solicitor; CO 15 Comp AA Regt, RNZA, 1948–55 (Lt-Col).

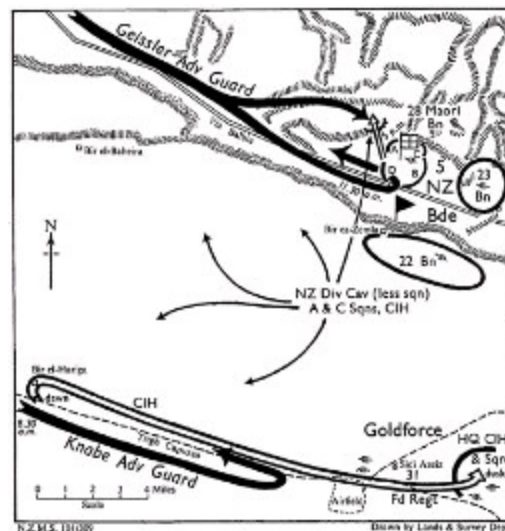
The advance guard along the [Via Balbia](#) was to be provided by 15 Panzer and that along the Trigh Capuzzo by 21 Panzer. The troops selected by Neumann-Silkow were Headquarters of 200 Regiment, 15 Motor Cycle Battalion, a company and a half of anti-tank guns, and a troop and a half of 33 Artillery Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Geissler of 200 Regiment—hence the title Geissler Advance Guard. Knabe Advance Guard was similarly constituted under Lieutenant-Colonel Knabe with II Battalion of 104 Infantry Regiment, an anti-tank company, artillery, and three tanks, to push eastwards along the Trigh Capuzzo.

Geissler returned to his headquarters in the early afternoon of 2 December with orders to 'push forward along the [Via Balbia](#) to [Bardia](#) and [Sollum](#) and contact Bach Bn [I Battalion, 104 Infantry Regiment] at [Halfaya](#).' His force set out at 3.30 p.m. and spent the night with Briel Group at [Gambut](#), while Knabe halted on the Trigh Capuzzo. Both set out eastwards early next morning and soon found out that the western and south-western approaches to [Bardia](#) were now guarded far more securely than when [Africa Corps](#) had visited the area five days before.

Divisional Cavalry and 5 New Zealand Brigade were stationed on the [Via Balbia](#), patrolling westwards between the road and the sea, and at Point 208, three miles south-east of [Sidi Azeiz](#), Goldforce was assembling under Lieutenant-Colonel Goulder of 31 Field Regiment, RA. Goulder had the [Central India Horse](#) (similar in composition to Divisional Cavalry), his own regiment, an anti-tank battery, and a

detachment of engineers. His task was to patrol up to and along the top of the lofty escarpment overlooking the [Via Balbia](#) and westwards along the Trigh Capuzzo. In cold weather with frequent showers of rain these troops settled quickly into their new roles and many patrols fanned out from 5 Brigade across the broken country to the north, which yielded a number of prisoners and much equipment and evidently still harboured many enemy service troops. South of the [Via Balbia](#), however, there was at first little doing. A Goldforce patrol met one from [11 Hussars](#) at Bir el-Hariga on 2 December and Divisional Cavalry found no enemy as far west as Bir el Baheira. Later in the day air reconnaissance gave warning that the enemy was reconnoitring eastwards towards [Gambut](#) and a German patrol clashed briefly at dusk with elements of 5 Brigade.

Next morning A Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, and A Company of 28 Battalion on their way to Bir el Baheira caught sight of an enemy force with artillery and about a hundred vehicles. The patrol hastily withdrew to 5 Brigade Headquarters at Bir ez-Zemla and gave the alarm, all other patrols were recalled, the defences were manned, and the Cavalry withdrew to a position on the escarpment. CIH had already reported to Goldforce Headquarters that 8–12 tanks and 300 other vehicles were advancing along the Trigh Capuzzo and Goldforce patrols withdrew to [Sidi Azeiz](#), where 31 Field Regiment went into action.



ACTION AT MENASTIR, 3 DECEMBER

Geissler Advance Guard came on cautiously and halted two miles west of 28 (Maori) Battalion, infantry dismounted and seemed to be preparing to attack, and

the Maoris waited tensely for the next development. D Company (less one platoon patrolling to the north) was astride the [Via Balbia](#) facing west, A was to the north facing the same way, C was to the right rear of A looking northwards and B faced east and south. The all-round defences included a troop each of 28 Field Battery and 32 Anti-Tank Battery, a section of 42 LAA Battery, and an MG platoon. On higher ground to the rear 22 Battalion, with a troop of field guns and two MG platoons but no anti-tank guns, also watched closely and counted 200 vehicles in the approaching force.

A few shells landed on the escarpment near the Maoris at 11.30 a.m. and the 25-pounders replied, then at midday the areas of A Company and Battalion Headquarters came under heavy MG fire. There was a scurry in the rear when 22 Battalion called all its vehicles down from the higher ground to gain shelter from the shellfire; but D Company of 28 Battalion kept out of sight and with admirable discipline held its fire until enemy vehicles were well past the FDLs and the nearest of them were no more than 60 yards from Maori Bren guns. The enemy had their eyes glued on the escarpment, expecting trouble from there and not from the seemingly empty desert around them. It was a situation of a kind the Maoris delighted in, and they kept the enemy in entire ignorance of their proximity until the commander of the section astride the road gave the order to open fire about 1 p.m. The first rounds were followed in an instant by murderous fire from every weapon within reach, including the Bofors guns. At short range this caused very heavy casualties, the front was soon strewn with blazing vehicles, and Geissler Advance Guard reeled back.

The enemy then split into two groups and bravely resumed the advance, two or three companies attacking D Company frontally and the others trying to work round the right flank, with support from guns and mortars. But the Maori position was far too strong. D Company and the artillery had no trouble holding the attack. Within an hour the enemy facing D Company were in full retreat, leaving behind many killed and wounded as well as unwounded prisoners, and abandoning most of their vehicles and even personal weapons.

A Company of the Maoris had a harder task, as the ground in front was undulating and there were many covered avenues of approach. The enemy there

refused to be easily dislodged and kept the Maoris under continual MG and mortar fire which remained troublesome throughout the afternoon. During a lull the battalion commander, Captain Love, therefore consulted with his company commanders and decided on a counter-attack to clear this front before dark. Only one section of A Company was committed to this and attacked northwards at 5 p.m. from the area of D Company, the carriers of B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, and the [Maori Battalion](#) co-operated closely, the field guns fired smoke shells to blind the enemy, and the anti-tank guns and MGs fired heavily in support. With this valuable help the section of Maoris cleared the disputed ground at the point of the bayonet and the carriers closed in to round up many of the fleeing enemy (the remnants of 1 Company of 15 Motor Cycle Battalion which did not receive Geissler's order to withdraw).

Geissler Advance Guard thus suffered a heavy defeat and its leading elements were almost annihilated at a cost to the defence of two killed and nine wounded. Enemy losses were estimated at Brigade Headquarters to be 239 killed, 129 wounded and 100 prisoners, a veritable massacre. Even in Geissler's report the German losses are listed as 8 wounded and 231 missing, a high proportion of the total force. The remnants of 15 Motor Cycle Battalion were formed into a headquarters and one company and took up positions at [Gambut](#) facing eastwards to guard against further pursuit.

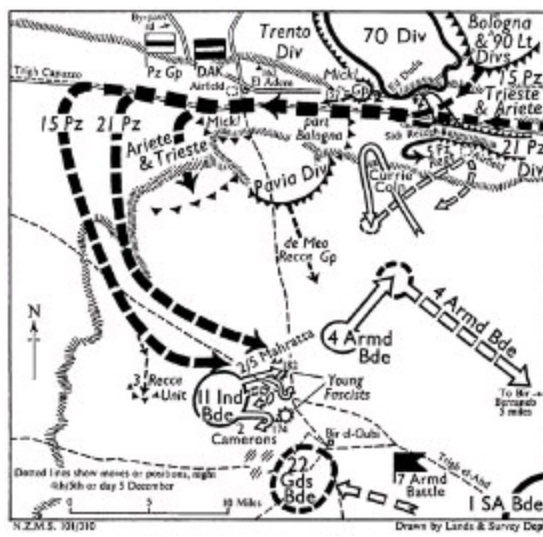
Knabe Advance Guard to the south fared slightly better, partly because it had tank support. Goldforce had no infantry and could not therefore set an ambush on the Maori pattern, nor did the open ground encourage this. The action was therefore fought at longer range, chiefly by the field guns, with anti-tank support when the enemy came close enough. At least one tank was knocked out and the enemy drew back at dusk.

vii

In the evening of 2 December Cruewell had recommended to Rommel that the area south-east of [Tobruk](#) should be cleared first and pointedly warned him against repeating 'the error of giving up ... a battlefield on which [Africa Corps](#) has won a victory and of undertaking operations some distance away instead of destroying the enemy utterly.' If the frontier operations were absolutely essential, he considered

they should be undertaken not with detached forces but with all of [Africa Corps](#) except the tanks, which all needed overhaul. His prediction about the advance guards was to be fulfilled in dramatic and costly fashion; but Rommel insisted on trying again to relieve the frontier forts, not with the whole of [Africa Corps](#) but with 15 Panzer (less 8 Panzer Regiment) plus the Italian Mobile Corps. Neumann-Silkow was not pleased with his task, the fate of Geissler's and Knabe's forces was ominous in the extreme, and a full-scale repetition of Rommel's 'evil dream' was out of the question. Ariete nevertheless carried on eastwards and eventually reached Gasr el Arid, while [Trieste](#) halted at Bir el Chelta.

These moves caused a reaction in Eighth Army Headquarters exactly opposite to the reaction to Rommel's dash to the frontier on 24 November. Instead of 'writing off' this new threat as a last desperate fling, Army was alarmed and at 11 a.m. on 4 December ordered 30 Corps to withdraw 4 Armoured Brigade. Then an even more drastic step was contemplated at 2.30 a.m. on the 5th when 30 Corps was instructed that, because of the enemy movements towards [Bardia](#), the relief of [Tobruk](#) would now have to take second place to the reduction of the frontier strongpoints. It was vital, Army thought, to stop the enemy 'refuelling from [Bardia](#) and operating in our rear'. Thus Rommel's purpose was misunderstood, the strength of his current move towards the frontier over-estimated, and the belief that [Bardia](#) was a major source of supply for [Africa Corps](#) lingered on. This change of policy threatened grave danger to 11 Indian Brigade, which was then attacking north-west of Bir el-Gubi, and also to the troops defending the [Tobruk](#) appendix. But General Norrie took a calmer view and was reluctant to leave the Indian brigade in the lurch by withdrawing his armour eastwards. Geissler's defeat was overwhelming, news of it helped to reassure Army Headquarters, and anxieties about [Bardia](#) gradually diminished. For some hours, nevertheless, there was a danger that the operations of 30 Corps would become seriously unbalanced.



FIGHTING NEAR BIR EL-GUBI, 4-5 DECEMBER

The 11th Indian Brigade had halted south-east of El Esem on the Trigh el-Abd to await the arrival of supporting arms. Duly reinforced with a makeshift squadron of sixteen Valentines, a battery each of field and anti-tank guns, and two troops of Bofors, and followed by 7 Medium Regiment, RA, this brigade moved off at 10 p.m. on the 3rd and after a long and difficult approach march attacked an enemy position north-west of Bir el-Gubi at 7.10 a.m. on the 4th. This was meant as a preliminary to the attack on [El Adem](#) and not much opposition was expected. There were only two outposts to overcome and a battalion was committed against each. The nearer, Point 174, four miles north-west of El Gubi, was thought to be the weaker and only three Valentines supported 2 Camerons there. Thirteen I tanks helped 2/5 Mahratta to seize the other, Point 182, with ease, and the Indians gained 250 prisoners and much war material. Point 174 proved much stronger, however, and its garrison of [Young Fascists](#) held out against repeated attacks by both battalions and caused them heavy losses.

It was at the height of this fighting that Ritchie asked Norrie to send 4 Armoured Brigade 50 miles eastwards to deal with the enemy advances along the [Via Balbia](#) and Trigh Capuzzo (after these had been abandoned!) and Norrie objected strongly. Later in the day, however, when Eighth Army continued to press the point, he ordered Gott to move the armour 20 miles eastwards. Even this gesture, however, weakened his position greatly and put the tanks too far away to protect 11 Indian Brigade at El Gubi if a panzer threat developed.

No such threat then seemed likely; but in fact Rommel had once again concentrated to strike at the vital point. After renewed but unsuccessful attacks by 11 Indian Brigade on Point 174 on 5 December, [Africa Corps](#) suddenly intervened just before dusk. With 15 Panzer (43 tanks) on the right and 21 Panzer (six tanks) on the left, the Corps flooded irresistibly through two companies of 2/5 Mahratta and linked up with the [Young Fascists](#) at Point 174. For a few minutes there was chaos, and had [Africa Corps](#) held its ground it could have created more havoc next morning in 30 Corps. But Cruewell took it into his head that his force was somehow threatened and he withdrew westwards. He had less to fear than he thought; for 4 Armoured Brigade, now with 136 tanks, was 20 miles away at Bir Berraneb. The panzer stroke, however, was enough to put the Indian brigade out of the battle. Arrangements were then made for 22 Guards Brigade to relieve the remnants of 11 Indian Brigade (which was held in reserve for a day or two and then withdrawn on 11 December to refit). It was the sixth brigade of Eighth Army to meet this fate,¹ and there was now a grave danger that the Guards brigade would become the seventh.

¹ The first was 7 Armd, then came 5 SA Bde, 22 Armd, and 4 and 6 NZ Bdes.

viii

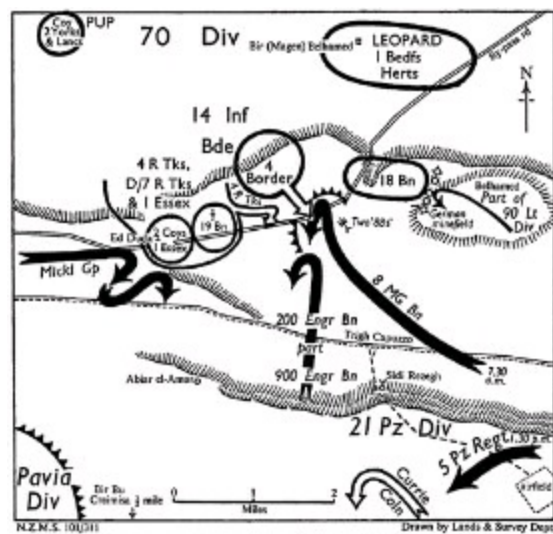
Meanwhile another unsuccessful attack was mounted on Ed Duda, concurrently with the attempts by Knabe and Geissler to get through to [Bardia](#). Orders for this were given to 90 Light early on 3 December; but General Suemmermann's troops were incapable of any such effort. The rout of Kolbeck Battalion (by 1 Bedfords and Herts and 18 Battalion) early on the 2nd indicated a low level of spirits, and even a message from Rommel himself on the 3rd that the 'fighting in North Africa has been decided in the meantime',¹ though it caused 'great rejoicing', failed to restore the morale of the troops. In the end [Africa Corps](#) perceived this and agreed that all 90 Light could do was to provide artillery support. An attack by other troops was therefore planned for the morning of the 4th.

The troops selected came from various quarters and were all tired and

dispirited. The 21st Panzer provided 8 MG Battalion to attack from the south-east and elements of 200 and 900 Engineer

¹ Diary of 90 Lt Div. The message was issued by Rommel on 2 Dec and proclaimed a great victory, though the troops were exhorted to maintain their efforts 'until the enemy is trampled into the dust.'

Battalions were to strike from the south, while what was left of Mickl Group (500 German infantry and Italian sappers with two '88s', eight LAA guns, and four Italian '105s') advanced on Ed Duda from the west.



THE SECOND ATTACK ON ED DUDA, 4 december

The defences were now manned by 14 Infantry Brigade with 1 Essex (two companies plus A and B Companies of 19 Battalion) at Ed Duda, 4 Border to the north-east (in place of 2/13 Australian Battalion), and 18 New Zealand Battalion on the saddle west of Belhamed, while 4 Royal Tanks (twenty-odd I tanks) and three field regiments were in support. One Essex company, with excellent support from the I tanks, repulsed Mickl Group with ease, and then the other Essex company dealt with the German sappers attacking from the south. A quick thrust by 8 MG Battalion reached the By-pass road where this lay outside the defences between 18 Battalion and 4 Border, and the latter counter-attacked vigorously with tank support, gaining 1000 yards of ground but failing to dislodge some German posts. The '88s', firing at long range, picked off the I tanks one after the other and by the end of the afternoon

disabled fifteen of them. This loss was more than counter-balanced, however, by a sudden raid on the rear of the enemy at Bir Bu Creimisa and [Sidi Rezegh](#) by Currie Column, which seized several anti-tank guns and a number of prisoners and used its 25-pounders most effectively, causing much alarm.

Dudaforce of 19 Battalion was heavily shelled, but not otherwise engaged, and the southern flank of 18 Battalion was mortared intensely, fourteen men being wounded. Then two enemy tanks tried to drive across the German minefield which covered the front of 18 Battalion and one of them struck a mine. Anti-tank fire destroyed this tank and the other one withdrew. When 4 Border failed in a final counter-attack and some of them withdrew through the lines of 18 Battalion, Colonel Peart was asked to mount a similar attack. This was first deferred until after dark and then cancelled. Patrols brought in many prisoners and the two troublesome '88s' were captured.

ix

Because the troops at Ed Duda beat off these attacks without help, the plans 70 Division was making for a thrust towards [El Adem](#) in support of 30 Corps were undisturbed, and this thrust was now expected to take place on 6 December. Once again, however, the battle outpaced the planners and changed its complexion, like the desert chameleon, with bewildering ease. When Rommel realised about midday on 4 December that the Ed Duda attack would not succeed, he decided to withdraw from the eastern half of the [Tobruk](#) perimeter, thereby forestalling most of the [El Adem](#) project. Attempts to reach [Bardia](#) had failed, the Axis troops at [Tobruk](#) could not maintain the siege on their extended front much longer, and it was now urgently necessary from Rommel's viewpoint to concentrate against 30 Corps in the El Gubi area. [Africa Corps](#) therefore assembled its scattered elements and was able to make its sudden reappearance on the 5th against 11 Indian Brigade. [Gambara Corps](#) had been recalled; but [Trieste](#) and [Ariete](#) were slowed down by the Jock Columns as they withdrew. For the time being at least the frontier line would have to be abandoned and Rommel was unhappily aware that his garrisons there had rations to last only until the 6th. On the 2nd he had signalled a victory (to Rome and [Berlin](#) as well as to his own troops); on the 4th he conceded something very close to defeat.

[Africa Corps](#), after disentangling itself in the morning of the 6th from various

elements of 30 Corps, was nevertheless well placed to strike again heavily and perhaps decisively; the British armour was still marking time and 22 Guards Brigade and the remnants of 11 Indian Brigade were open to panzer attack. The Italian Mobile Corps was also coming back into the picture. But Cruewell hesitated and struck too late. Another inconclusive mêlée ensued after dark near Bir el-Gubi. Next day the British armour arrived on the scene and Cruewell's opportunity was lost.

On the 6th 15 Panzer lost its GOC, Major-General Neumann-Silkow, who was mortally wounded by a shellburst in the late afternoon as he was just about to attack. Major Kriebel, a General Staff officer, assumed command capably enough; but Neumann-Silkow had fought skilfully and at times brilliantly and Rommel and Cruewell owed much to him.

A few miles to the east another event occurred on 6 December which had little influence on the battle as a whole but was highly gratifying to the New Zealanders and others who were in the captured New Zealand MDS near Point 175. This day Wilson Column edged forward gingerly, not wanting to start a fight and perhaps harm the patients, and occupied the MDS without opposition, bringing to an end a nine-day ordeal for patients and staff. The Italian guards had flown. The walking wounded were soon despatched southwards to waiting lorries and the more serious cases were evacuated by ambulance car later in the day. More than sixty patients and staff had already escaped, including Colonels Dittmer and [Kippenberger](#), and many hundreds of others had been taken by the Italians to [Derna](#) and [Benghazi](#), including 14 officers (the COs of 4, 5 and 6 Field Ambulances among them) and 182 other ranks of the New Zealand medical staff. Others had died from their existing wounds, or from further wounds received in the MDS, or from the privations imposed by captivity. An acute shortage of water caused many patients to die from that alone, not from thirst but from the gradual 'dehydration' of their tissues, and the conditions in the operating theatre without adequate water supplies were appalling. Other patients were much affected by the cold at night, there being no kerosene for the heaters in the marquees. By 6 December there were only 30 gallons of water left and very little food for the 860 patients and staff remaining. Wilson Column was thus most welcome and none of the patients and staff were sorry to see the last of 'Whistling Wadi'. ¹

Rommel had been warned on 5 December by a special emissary from Comando Supremo that no marked improvement could be expected in the transport of supplies and reinforcements to North Africa until Luft flotte 2 began operating from Sicily at the end of December. His situation stood in sharp contrast to that of his enemies, therefore, and he could see for himself that fresh British forces were being committed in the south. On the 7th he concluded that if Panzer Group could not achieve a major success at El Gubi that day it would have to withdraw to Gazala and abandon the Tobruk front. The heavy artillery had already left that front, 90 Light and most of its Italian neighbours had moved back behind El Adem, and the mere suggestion of withdrawal at Africa Corps Headquarters at such a difficult time was enough to bring it about. Cruewell was only human and he was now faced with the imposing mass of 4 Armoured Brigade, which this day clashed with 15 Panzer and helped to disable eleven more of its dwindling stock of tanks. No decision was therefore reached in the fighting on the 7th, Africa Corps drew back ten miles north-west of El Gubi in the night, and next day Panzer Group began to occupy the Gazala position.

Though twice postponed, the attack on El Adem remained on Eighth Army's books and in the end was mounted by the Tobruk garrison alone, under the direction of 13 Corps. Thirtieth Corps had hoped to attack El Adem in the night of 7–8 December, but was too well tied up at El Gubi. In the meantime Axis troops thinned out in the eastern sector with little difficulty and small loss. Though the artillery, the carriers of 19 Battalion, and others troops were active in harassing the retreating enemy, General Scobie kept back his main reserves for the El Adem push.

Had Rommel's orders been obeyed the garrison would have punched thin air when it attacked on the appointed night. Rommel had ordered all troops east of El Adem to evacuate the Tobruk

¹ See McKinney, *Medical Units*, pp. 168–76.

front, and Pavia was about to comply when General Gambaro arrived and, in his capacity as Chief of Staff to Bastico, counter-manded the order. The plan was that

2/13 Australian Battalion on the right would seize 'Snow White' (formerly 'Plonk'), 2 Queen's (appropriately) would take 'Queen', 2 York and Lancs would put two companies into 'Doc', 2 Durham Light Infantry would push westwards along the escarpment from Ed Duda as far as Point 157, halfway to El Adem, and 4 Border would then follow through the DLI to take Point 162, north of El Adem. Five battalions were thus involved; but of these only two saw any fighting. The tank support for the Australians was held up and their part was therefore cancelled. Doc was found to be unoccupied. The Queen's struck much trouble from anti-tank mines, then the attacking company came under heavy mortar fire, was strongly opposed at Queen, and in the end withdrew, having lost nine men. The DLI struck solid resistance from troops of Pavia at Point 157 but with tank support took the position and 130 prisoners at a cost of 11 killed and 25 wounded. Finally 4 Border, aided by a patrol from 19 Battalion, passed through the DLI and occupied Point 162 unopposed. In the morning the Australians found their objective unoccupied and gladly took it over and 2 Queen's had the same experience; both agreed that it was far easier to move by day than by night through the intricate Tobruk minefields.

xi

Though over-anxious about the thrusts towards Bardia and inclined to exaggerate the significance of that beleaguered fortress, Ritchie and Auchinleck nevertheless remained hopeful about the general situation. Norrie meanwhile continued his operations south of Tobruk, refusing to be thrown off balance by Rommel's unpredictable manoeuvres. Thirtieth Corps was still unable to concentrate to strike really effective blows; but by weight of numbers Eighth Army was forcing the enemy back and sapping his strength.

Thus the tactical problems confronting Eighth Army were not really solved: they merely disappeared in clouds of dust raised by the RASC lorries at the final stage of a gigantic administrative effort. When Africa Corps committed four Italian guns to the Ed Duda attack it carefully noted the ammunition they possessed; but 30 Corps took it for granted that its 25-pounders would carry on punching at the enemy until they wore him down, that the fighting vehicles would continue as before in prodigal disregard of the petrol they consumed, and that units and formations which suffered heavy loss would be withdrawn and replaced. By Panzer Group standards the

damage suffered by 11 Indian Brigade was not crippling; but the Guards brigade was nevertheless sent forward to relieve the Indians. Weapons and equipment were similarly renewed. The tank strength of 4 Armoured Brigade on 4 December was 98; on the 6th it was 136.

Rommel was provisioned from a much smaller barrel and he had long since scraped its bottom. Those which survived of the units which had met the first crusader onslaught were still fighting. The men were weary, in the main unshaven (for lack of water), and bedraggled in a way, for example, that astonished the Maoris at [Menastir](#); but they had to carry on. The troopers of 4 Armoured Brigade were now desperately tired; yet they had done less fighting than the panzer troops, who had been almost incessantly in action, and it is a wonder how the latter kept going at all. Petrol was always precious to the Germans and Italians and, at critical moments, exceedingly hard to procure. With ammunition it was much the same. Rommel's exhortations on this subject to the Italians who managed his land and sea communications effected no improvement, and when he learned on 5 December that he could expect nothing but the most essential of supplies until the end of the month he had to plan accordingly. Sometimes he could outwit or outmanoeuvre his opponents; sometimes by relentless determination he could seize a local advantage; but he had no answer to those who solved the multitudinous supply problems of Eighth Army and ensured that crusader would seldom be halted by lack of the sinews of war.

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

CHAPTER 26 – GAZALA AND BEYOND

CHAPTER 26

Gazala and Beyond

i

THE receding tide of battle left 5 New Zealand Brigade stranded from 4 December onwards at [Capuzzo](#), [Musaid](#) and Upper Sollum, its troop-carrying lorries withdrawn to help carry 5 Indian Brigade forward. After the slaughter at [Menastir](#) there was little action of note, though patrols were busy in co-operation with 3 South African Brigade, which now 'masked' the northern half of the [Bardia](#) perimeter. Five officers arrived from Base on the 7th to take over the main appointments at 5 Brigade Headquarters and Brigadier [Wilder](#)¹ became the new brigade commander.² Expect for some excitement when an enemy submarine appeared off [Sollum](#) (and was engaged by the artillery with the Maoris), the front was quiet. The weather was cold and windy, with heavy cloud and a few showers which made living conditions unpleasant.

Divisional Cavalry, rejoined on the 5th by C Squadron and reinforced with artillery and MMGs, sent mobile columns in conjunction with the South Africans to comb the country north of the [Via Balbia](#). On 6 December Vic Column, a mixed force including a carrier troop of Divisional Cavalry, discovered a large German dressing station containing over 300 enemy wounded and a few British, and carried on into [Tobruk](#).³ On the 8th another column came upon the main tank repair depot of 15 Panzer. Next day B Squadron attacked this with two South African companies and supporting artillery, while A Squadron covered the right flank. Half-

¹ [Maj-Gen A. S. Wilder](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d., Order of the White Eagle (Serb); Te Hau, [Waipukurau](#); born NZ 24 May 1890; sheep farmer; Maj, Wgtn Mtd Rifles, 1914–19; CO 25 Bn May 1940–Sep 1941; comd NZ Trg Group, [Maadi Camp](#), Sep–Dec 1941, Jan–Feb 1942; 5 Bde 6 Dec 1941–17 Jan 1942; 5 Div (in NZ) Apr 1942–Jan 1943; 1 Div Jan–Nov 1943.

² Other appointments were:
BM [Maj J. D. Armstrong](#)
Staff Captain [Capt A. E. B. Burge](#)

Lt-Col Andrew resumed command of 22 Bn and Maj H. G. Dyer arrived to take over command of 28 (Maori) Bn from Capt Love.

³ A patrol of 11 Hussars had met 1 Essex earlier in the day and the fortress was for the second time relieved. Though this was less auspicious than the junction with NZ Div on 26–27 Nov, it was to prove more enduring.

hearted opposition was soon overcome and there followed a miniature Scapa Flow on land as the Germans hastened to 'scuttle' their fleet of tanks with high-explosive. 'We assisted them in putting the tanks, 35 in all, beyond repair', the Divisional Cavalry diary states, 'and took thirty prisoners.' The figures given by the South Africans are 38 tanks destroyed and 23 prisoners taken. Half a dozen tanks were 'runners', and of these one drove off along the coast; the rest were immobile though not all helpless. The resistance was nevertheless negligible and there were no casualties.

ii

Divisional Cavalry was now under the command of 2 South African Division and thus it remained for the next few weeks: 5 New Zealand Brigade was at last (without Freyberg's knowledge) allotted a more active part in the campaign. Unit wireless sets had told their clusters of listeners of great events elsewhere which were transforming the war: the last German thrust towards Moscow had been beaten back and for a fortnight the Russians had been staging counter-attacks, first against Rostov in the south and then at Tula near Moscow. Then came Pearl Harbour, war with Japan, and the first glimmerings of a threat to Australia and perhaps New Zealand. The occasional exchanges of gun fire or patrol clashes at Sollum or Capuzzo seemed by comparison trivial and the men were not sorry to pack up and leave in the early hours of the 9th, being picked up near Sidi Azeiz by 4 RMT Company from Tobruk.

General Godwin-Austen had asked for 5 Brigade (or other 'fresh' troops) to push through to El Adem and beyond, and on its way forward it drove through the scene of Hargest's last stand, amply documented with derelicts, on to the Via Balbia, and

thence to Sidi Bu Amud, the heart of General Suemmermann's positions north of the Corridor until a few days ago. The journey was signposted by wreckage and the desert littered with equipment and personal belongings discarded in haste. Victory was in the air, the weather for the moment was kind, and men expected to be in the thick of things in a matter of hours.

Next day disclosed, however, that the enemy had withdrawn altogether from the [Tobruk](#) front and was occupying the [Gazala](#) position. Before 13 Corps could push on it needed to assemble mobile forces and supply echelons. To this end the New Zealand troops in [Tobruk](#) had already contributed 30 three-ton lorries, 50 smaller vehicles, and 50 motor-cycles to help motorise a brigade of 70 Division. All other New Zealand vehicles except those of troops required for further operations had left [Tobruk](#) on 8 December in a convoy escorted to the frontier by Vic Column and 1 Army Tank Brigade. Passing through the Wire south of [Sheferzen](#), this convoy of just over 2000 men and 500 vehicles, comprising the bulk of [Divisional Headquarters](#) and the New Zealand administrative 'tail', carried on unescorted to [Baggush](#) and there rejoined the force which had withdrawn from [Zaafran](#) ten days before. Only 18 Battalion with Dudaforce at 19 Battalion under command, the composite New Zealand field and light anti-aircraft batteries, and 4 RMT Company were now retained by 13 Corps, together with 5 Brigade.

Various other small New Zealand parties had already left [Tobruk](#) by sea or air, and of these the unluckiest was a group of wounded, a detachment of [Divisional Headquarters](#) urgently needed at [Baggush](#), and an escort for General von Ravenstein and another German officer. This group left in the small passenger steamer *Chakdina* on 5 December, in company with smaller New Zealand contingents in the destroyer *Farndale* and the corvette *Thorgrim*. There were 600 aboard the *Chakdina* including 120 New Zealanders, 97 of them wounded, when the little ship put to sea at 5 p.m. bound for [Alexandria](#). Four hours out in brilliant moonlight it was torpedoed and sank rapidly, taking with it all but some 190 men rescued by the *Farndale* and *Thorgrim*; eighty of the New Zealanders were lost, most of them men who had been wounded in the fighting at [Sidi Rezegh](#), and a tragic sequel was thus added to a costly chapter in the history of the Division. ¹ Of the 480 other troops aboard—wounded, medical staff, and a small ship's company—about 320 were lost. This was the heaviest loss of life sustained in any single incident of the long tale of risky endeavour by the crews

of the small ships which supplied [Tobruk](#) throughout its siege. Captain Bell, the GSO III (I) of the New Zealand Division, was in the *Thorgrim* as it stood by for some hours, braving further attacks, to pick up survivors, and was astonished when a naked man hauled aboard from the dark waters turned out to be General von Ravenstein.

iii

The depleted 5 Field Regiment was detached at [Tobruk](#) and combined with the composite New Zealand battery there to form a full regiment under Major [Sprosen](#).² In the meantime 5 Brigade went into action supported by 32 Army Tank Brigade (under the command of 13 Corps) and 1 RHA.

¹ A further similar sequel was the torpedoing of the *Jantzen* on 9 Dec while carrying 2100 PW from [Libya](#) to [Italy](#). In the resultant carnage 500-odd were killed and subsequent hardships killed many more. The *Jantzen* was beached in southern [Greece](#) and the survivors spent three months there in squalid circumstances before being sent on to [Italy](#). Another 44 New Zealanders lost their lives in this episode. See Mason, [Prisoners of War](#), pp. 110–12.

² Lt-Col J. F. R. [Sprosen](#), DSO, ED; [Christchurch](#); born [Christchurch](#), 20 Jan 1908; school teacher; CO 4 Fd Regt Apr–Jun 1942, Sep–Oct 1942; 5 Fd Regt Oct–Nov 1942; 14 Lt AA Regt Nov 1942–Jun 1943, Dec 1943–Nov 1944; 7 A–Tk Regt Nov–Dec 1944; wounded 24 May 1941.

The plan was to advance along the escarpment south of the [Via Balbia](#) as far towards [Gazala](#) as possible without heavy fighting, the left flank being guarded by the army tank brigade. At the same time 70 Division would mop up between [Acroma](#) and the sea, and 4 Indian Division, with its left flank covered by 7 Armoured Division, would push on round the [Gazala](#) position to trap the forces there. Raids on the enemy L of C towards [Mechili](#) and Giovanni Berta were expected to hasten the end.

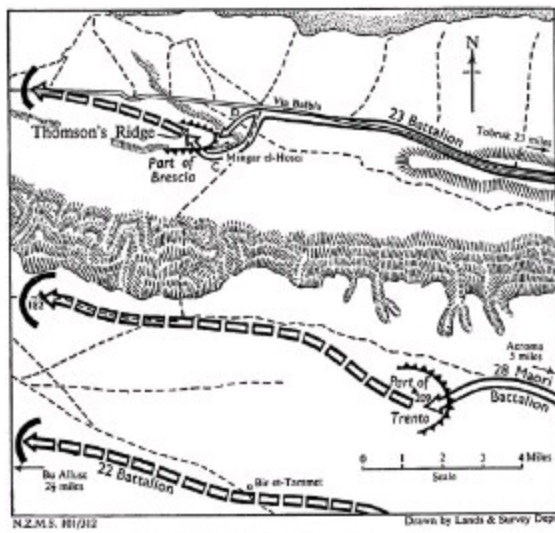
The armour now passed to Godwin-Austen's command and General Norrie's

headquarters was to conduct the siege of the frontier forts. The technical layout of the two corps headquarters, however, was very different, that of 30 Corps having excellent wireless links and being designed for mobile operations while 13 Corps had the telephone facilities required for more static operations. General Ritchie perhaps felt that Godwin-Austen might do better than Norrie in co-ordinating the operations of the armour with those of the infantry; but the technical deficiencies of Godwin-Austen's organisation were serious and it soon appeared that he, too, was unable to get the British armour to come to close grips with the diminishing enemy armour.

iv

The Gazala defences were of long standing and their general layout well known. They swung south and then south-west from Ain el- [Gazala](#) (a coast oasis not unlike [Baggush](#)) for about a dozen miles to a southern anchor at [Alem Hamza](#). This flank was open, and without a strong force the position could not be held, as Rommel well knew. The Italian infantry divisions were now shared between [10 Corps](#) on the coast and [21 Corps](#) inland. The Italian Mobile Corps ([Ariete](#) and [Trieste](#), both very weak) was at [Alem Hamza](#) and [Africa Corps](#) lay behind the southern flank, ready to counter-attack. These dispositions, of course, were not immediately apparent to [13 Corps](#), which pushed westwards with [5 New Zealand Brigade](#) on the right and next to it [4 Indian Division](#), flanked by [Jock Columns](#) which were in turn backed by [4 Armoured Brigade](#). The first task was to ascertain if the enemy meant to give battle at [Gazala](#) or merely to cover a much longer retreat.

In the first instance [5 New Zealand Brigade](#) advanced westwards as a brigade group, starting at 3 a.m. on the 11th and driving through [El Adem](#) to [Acroma](#), west of [Tobruk](#). Anti-tank mines on both sides of the road slowed the brigade down to below the scheduled ten miles in the hour and a [Bofors gun](#) overturned at a culvert and was abandoned, to be salvaged later.



APPROACHING GAZALA, 11-12 DECEMBER
APPROACHING GAZALA, 11-12 DECEMBER

From [Acroma](#) onwards 23 Battalion advanced along the main road and 28 (Maori) Battalion followed the track running west-wards above the escarpment, intending to attack Point 209, eight miles away. After driving 12 miles westwards along the [Via Balbia](#), C Company of 23 Battalion was shelled and had to dismount, Chestnut Troop of 1 RHA engaged the enemy guns, and the battalion drew back a little to plan the next step.

The enemy air forces were now active and both E Troop of 42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery with 23 Battalion and D Troop with the Maoris were soon in action. Fourteen Stukas escorted by Me109Fs on their way to [Tobruk](#) flew low over the 23rd and on their way back E Troop shot down a Stuka.

Reconnaissance in front of 5 Brigade disclosed that the enemy was holding a triangular ridge south of the road with its eastern apex at Mingar el-Hosci, a name soon to be replaced in the jargon of the 23rd by 'Thomson's Ridge', since it was C Company under Captain Thomson, led by Bren carriers, which stormed this feature in the early afternoon of 11 December. Thomson was wounded and Lieutenant [Stubbs](#)¹ took command, only to be wounded shortly afterwards. Pushing on in extended order over sandy ground which minimised the blast of the shell and mortar bursts, the infantry closed relentlessly to within 50 yards of the enemy. Then they rose to their feet again and, with their bayonets fixed, the New Zealanders appearing through the smoke and dust looked altogether too formidable to the elements of [Brescia](#) here. Those Italians who had not already fled promptly surrendered, 9

officers and 252 other ranks all told. Much equipment was also seized, and C Company turned several [Breda](#) guns and other weapons against their former owners, who were now rallying on the western side of a landing ground about a mile away.

Thomson's Ridge now came under concentrated fire and it was soon evident that a counter-attack was impending. C Company, though ably supported by Chestnut Troop, was very much on its own, but the men were quickly organised to meet the threat and gave the Italians a very hot reception. The enemy in obviously superior numbers came within 50–60 yards of the New Zealand positions, but there they halted, and after some hesitation they broke and ran, leaving many of their weapons behind and some vehicles. D Company arrived at the critical moment and together with C held the ridge until dark. C Company had lost two killed, two missing and 26 wounded, modest figures for dislodging two enemy battalions from a commanding feature. At dusk C Company and then D withdrew as instructed and the enemy at the same time moved several miles westwards to the [Gazala](#) line proper, abandoning a large amount of equipment and stores.

The Maoris had meanwhile seized Point 209 with ease and with it 200 prisoners at very small cost. A platoon of A Company, widely extended and supported by field guns and MMGs, exploited to the west and kept up the pressure on the enemy until dark, at which time the latter, elements of Trento Division, withdrew like [Brescia](#) to the main [Gazala](#) position, leaving behind the astonishing total of 1123 prisoners (including 36 officers), and field and anti-tank guns, MMGs, and stores of all kinds. The Maoris lost 5 killed and 11 wounded. A carrier from the battalion also rounded up four members of the [Luftwaffe](#) who descended by parachute after aerial clashes overhead, shot one of them when he offered resistance, and handed the other three to 5 Indian Brigade, which had moved forward to the left front.

¹ [Maj C. L. Stubbs](#); [Lower Hutt](#); born Dunedin, 17 Jan 1905; traveller; wounded 11 Dec 1941.

Next day 5 New Zealand Brigade advanced on a three-battalion front, with 22 Battalion on the left of the Maoris. Carrier patrols from the 23rd on the right soon brought in thirty Italians from Trento. When the battalion was halted by shellfire later in the morning, Chestnut Troop silenced this fire and scored a direct hit on a

75-millimetre gun. The battalion was obviously approaching a strongly-held position and was ordered not to incur heavy casualties; so it halted a little to the west when shelling again became heavy.

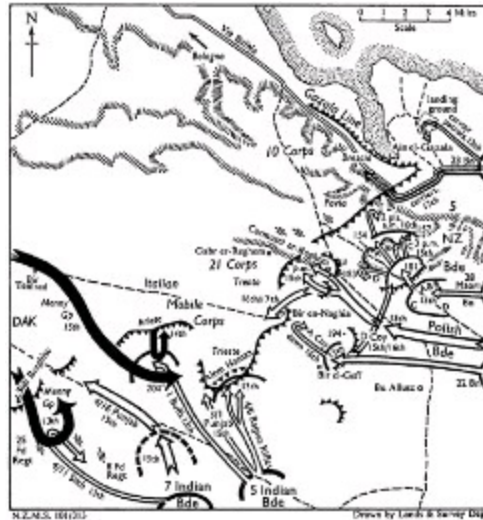
In the centre the Maoris were dive-bombed and lost two killed and one wounded, but came through much shellfire unscathed. They occupied Point 182, above the escarpment south-west of Thomson's Ridge, without opposition, digging in there with B, C and D Companies forward and A Company in reserve.

On the left the 22nd, after passing through an area littered with dangerous 'thermos' bombs (which exploded when moved), reached first Bir et-Tammet and then a depression in the ground a few miles short of its final objective, [Bu Allusc](#). One truck was damaged on the way by air attack. Heavy fighting seemed to be in progress to the west and a carrier patrol which went out to investigate took 120 prisoners.

By dusk the brigade had reached a line running roughly north-south some three to six miles east of the [Gazala](#) line. After dark a 23 Battalion patrol came upon an enemy party escorting forty-three captive Indians and clashed sharply with it, wounding six of the Indians before their identity was established. All in the end were freed and several Italians captured.

Further progress by 23 Battalion next day, 13 December, was difficult and the main activity was by carrier patrols and by Chestnut Troop of 1 RHA, which was heavily bombarded and lost one man killed and five wounded. A carrier patrol nevertheless reached one of the [Gazala](#) landing grounds. The Maoris carried on west-wards above a two-mile-wide stretch of extremely rough ground descending to the north and cut by innumerable wadis. Their objective was Point 181; but they were halted by concentrated artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire. Point 181 was evidently held in some strength and they had been forbidden to attack without adequate support,¹ so they dug in about a mile to the south-east on a front of nearly a mile, with A and B Companies forward on the right, C on lower ground to the south, and D in reserve.

¹ In accordance with instructions [Gen Freyberg](#) had given to Brig Wilder which were hotly challenged, when they heard of them, by Godwin-Austen



ASSAULT ON THE GAZALA LINE, 13-16 DECEMBER

From this area the Maoris saw something of an attack mounted by 22 Battalion on Point 194 to the south-west. D Company of the 22nd had already taken an outpost with twenty-four prisoners, and the main attack went in at 2 p.m. with twelve I tanks in support and the attached troop of 1 RHA providing covering fire. The position was soon overrun and 100 prisoners taken, together with several anti-tank guns and mortars, and the attackers suffered no loss at all, a remarkable feat. Further advance was barred, however, by at least ten troops of artillery, which kept up heavy defensive fire, and the battalion therefore consolidated its gains. The whole brigade had come up against strong defences which the enemy gave every indication of wanting to hold indefinitely.

v

To the south, 5 Indian Brigade tried to swing in round the southern flank of the enemy defences, but met strong opposition and failed to reach [Alem Hamza](#), though [1 Buffs](#) managed to force its way through to Point 204, six miles farther west, on 13 December. This created a salient, however, which was vulnerable to counter-attack. The 7th Indian Brigade tried to strike up from the south to ease the position and 4/11 Sikh were debussing in front of 25 Field Regiment, RA, some two miles south of Sidi Breghisc and six miles south-west of [1 Buffs](#), when the area was heavily shelled.

Shortly afterwards thirty-nine enemy tanks were counted as they approached. The infantry were just able to withdraw in their lorries; but 25 Field had to stay and fight it out, supported by a detachment of [8 Royal Tanks](#) which came forward on their left and also by 8 Field Regiment, RA, which was coming into action a mile to the east. Anti-tank guns in support included a troop of 65 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, and there were two troops of Bofors at hand.

The opposition was even stronger than it looked. Once again [Africa Corps](#) had been able to concentrate without hindrance by the British armour and was now counter-attacking with the 51 tanks of 5 and 8 Panzer Regiments, their usual accompaniment of '88s' and other anti-tank guns, 2 MG Battalion following closely to their left rear, and 8 MG Battalion as well as the artillery firing in support—a formidable threat indeed. Overwhelming fire was concentrated on the foremost battery of 25 Field Regiment and all its guns were put out of action. A detachment of [8 Royal Tanks](#) also lost heavily. Defensive fire accounted for fifteen tanks (about half of which were repairable), however, and halted the counter-attack.

'Early destruction enemy's armour is imperative', Godwin-Austen signalled to Gott at 10.20 p.m. on the 13th; '... we may miss great opportunity for destruction of his [the enemy's] armour', he added, unless 4 Armoured Brigade were moved to a central position, ready to strike round either flank. Early next morning Gott replied that he was moving his armour to the north-west and thought this would 'affect enemy on 4 Ind Div front' about 4 p.m. This was a slower tempo of operations than Godwin-Austen required and he urged Gott to get the armour into 'immediate readiness to attack'. Later in the morning the two met and agreed on a left hook by 4 Armoured Brigade towards [Tmimi](#) to threaten the rear of the [Gazala](#) line and 'bring enemy to action' not later than 11 a.m. on 15 December. But the action against 25 Field Regiment on the 13th deserved close study. It showed that the Germans had not lost the art of concentrating all arms in support of panzer counter-thrusts and were still able to strike back hard, as [7 Indian Brigade](#) had twice found out. The 5th Indian Brigade was soon to learn the same lesson.

A remarkable change had meanwhile taken place in the minds of Gott, Gatehouse, and other senior armoured commanders, unperceived by their superiors. The main objective was still to seek out and destroy the enemy armour, but these commanders had given up hope of achieving this by direct means, though they now

knew they outnumbered the enemy in tanks by at least two to one. 'In every action the enemy showed his skill in effecting co-operation between tanks and field and anti-tank artillery', Gott wrote shortly afterwards. 'No attack by our more lightly armoured tanks was possible', he added, 'except by making a very wide detour and coming in on his soft-skinned vehicles.'¹ Godwin-Austen's earnest efforts to bring the British armour into the main battle were therefore wasted and any serious infantry threat to the [Gazala](#) line would run a grave risk of overwhelming panzer counter-attack. Fortunately Rommel's estimate of the potentialities of the British armour was higher than Gott's (and Cruewell's).

vi

Fifth New Zealand Brigade was now reinforced by the newly reconstituted 5 Field Regiment under Major Sprosen. On arrival 27 Battery (which had three troops) came under the command of 22 Battalion and 28 Battery (with only two troops) supported the Maoris. The troop of 1 RHA with the Maoris now joined Chestnut Troop of the same regiment in support of 23 Battalion. The Maoris had moved towards Point 181 with A Company on the right, B in the centre, and C followed by D on the left. At 3 a.m. on 14 December the guns opened a 15-minute concentration and the Maoris closed in with bayonets fixed, meeting mortar, MG and anti-tank fire and using grenades freely to overcome it. In little more than an hour resistance ended and C and D Companies began to dig in just west of the foremost defences, while A Company extended the position on lower ground to the east-north-east. B Company, which had advanced farthest, struck trouble, however, from another enemy position on the escarpment to the west and was twice counter-attacked. Pavia Division contributed another 382 prisoners (including 18 officers) in this action to the swelling total taken by 5 Brigade and many guns were also captured. The Maoris lost only three killed and 27 wounded, remarkably few in view of the thorough and skilfully laid-out defences which daylight revealed.

¹ An official report, quoted in UK Narrative Phase 4, 'The Advance to [Gazala](#) and the First Attack on [Bardia](#)' (hereinafter 'UK Narrative 4').

Three similar positions, however, were now located in an arc from west to north

of Point 181, uncomfortably close, and the Maoris had to put up with much hostile fire.

The other two battalions made no further move forward this day. Opposition had hardened and it was not possible to strike deeper into the [Gazala](#) line proper without a carefully planned programme. Indeed the widely dispersed units were vulnerable to counter-attack and the 22nd, facing north with its left flank open, was in considerable danger until the Polish Carpathian Brigade came forward and nosed into the gap between 22 and 28 Battalions. In the end it was decided that the Maoris should take the next step in conjunction with a thrust by the Poles.

Twice on the 14th 5 Brigade Headquarters was subjected to dive-bombing, which killed a total of four men and set an ammunition lorry on fire. One Stuka, however, was shot down by small-arms fire. Though the enemy was posted in considerable strength not far ahead of the Maoris, there were indications elsewhere on the 5 Brigade front of a deterioration in the morale of the Italians, one small band of whom surrendered this day to 23 Battalion and claimed to have shot their officer. The Maoris were therefore given the ambitious task of taking in daylight on the 15th all but one of the strongpoints on their immediate front, and of closing in to within a very short distance of the enemy on the escarpment to the west. The Poles were to push north-westwards between the Maoris and the 22nd, if possible right through the [Gazala](#) line, aided by fire from 22 Battalion, and the 23rd was to demonstrate on the escarpment to the north to distract attention from the main attacks.

Zero hour was 3 p.m. on 15 December, an unlikely time which caught the enemy napping. A Company of the Maoris reached within 100 yards of its objective to the north-west before attracting fire and soon took the position at the point of the bayonet. C Company, advancing due north, took the first line of trenches in similar fashion, but was then held up by heavy mortar and MG fire and could gain no more ground until two platoons of B Company edged round to the west of the strongpoint. When a section of carriers also came forward opposition began to crumble and C Company swarmed through the defences. Another 101 prisoners were taken, this time from [Brescia](#), at a cost of 10 killed and 37 wounded, most of them in A Company. With a vengeance the Maoris were making up for the time they had spent cooling their heels at Upper Sollum: first at [Menastir](#) against the Germans and now against three successive Italian divisions they were compiling an impressive list of

successes.

The Poles also attacked with great dash and reached the escarpment west of the Maoris, linking up with D Company of the latter. This company was now able to withdraw into reserve, together with a company of the 22nd. Resistance stiffened, however, and the Poles could not carry their attack right through the [Gazala](#) line, as had been hoped; but they prepared to push westwards next day along the escarpment.

The addition of the Polish brigade thickened up what had been a rather thinly-covered front facing the [Gazala](#) line; but 5 New Zealand Brigade was now awkwardly placed with the Poles between 22 Battalion and the rest of the brigade. Many hostile batteries had been located in the course of the fighting and, pending further attacks, the field artillery was redispersed for counter-battery tasks. During the day 23 Battalion lost the support of D Squadron, 7 Royal Tanks, which was urgently recalled by 32 Army Tank Brigade to support 4 Indian Division. Colonel Andrew of the 22nd remained anxious about his open left flank, with even more justification than he realised. [Africa Corps](#) had struck again a few miles to the west.

vii

After the setback to [7 Indian Brigade](#) at Sidi Breghisc on the 13th, when a field battery was overrun and an Indian battalion narrowly escaped the same fate, 5 Indian Brigade met more trouble next day near Point 204, a few miles to the east, this time from the remnants of Ariete. ¹ The nine I tanks and three cruisers of 1 Royal Tanks and a troop of 31 Field Regiment, RA, helped to repulse an attack at midday by ten or twelve tanks (wrongly reported to be German) and claimed to have put three of them out of action. Then fifteen Italian tanks renewed the attack and overran the troop of six 25-pounders.

The Germans did little on 14 December and General Cruewell was chiefly concerned with contradicting what he thought was Rommel's unduly gloomy view of the general situation. The Panzer Group staff had produced a map of the British situation which the DAK diary describes as 'extraordinarily pessimistic', pointing out that the British formations marked on it 'had taken a lot of punishment, to say the least.' Thus Cruewell echoed about Eighth Army the words Auchinleck and then

Ritchie were using about Panzer Group Africa. In this Cruewell aligned himself with General Bastico and the chief of Comando Supremo, General Cavallero, who were urging much the same opinion on Rommel. But Rommel, who was acutely sensitive to the weaknesses of the [Gazala](#) line, expected

¹ Ariete then had 30 tanks, 18 field guns, 10 anti-tank guns, and 700 Bersaglieri infantry. [Trieste](#) was reduced to 12 field and 15 anti-tank guns and three or four weak infantry battalions.

the British vigorously to exploit the open southern flank as he himself might have done had the situations been reversed. Cruewell, who had been more directly concerned than Rommel with the operations of the British armour, was less apprehensive.

After false reports of success at Point 204 (held by [1 Buffs](#)), which Rommel regarded as a vital link in the chain of defences, it became evident that the Italian operations to regain this area were not promising. Cruewell therefore committed his counter-attack force on 15 December to regain this position. The Italians nevertheless still held [Alem Hamza](#), farther to the east, which was from the British viewpoint even more important, and 4 Indian Division therefore prepared a heavier attack on this position. Both attacks went in together, 3/1 Punjab supported by a handful of I tanks attacking [Alem Hamza](#) from the south and the main weight of [Africa Corps](#) attacking the Buffs from the north-west.

For two days [1 Buffs](#) had held its exposed position at 204, three miles from [Alem Hamza](#) and 2500 yards from the rest of 5 Indian Brigade, with ten I tanks and one light tank of 4 Royal Tanks, a squadron of CIH, 31 Field Regiment, RA (less the troop lost the previous day), and a reinforced battery of anti-tank guns. Ariete made another dab at this group in the morning of the 15th and was again repulsed. Then, after much uncertainty about where the Italians and British were in this region, Menny Battle Group of 15 Panzer attacked Bir Temrad, six miles north-west of Point 204 and well outside the point of the wedge 13 Corps had driven into the Axis positions between [Africa Corps](#) and the Italian Mobile Corps. ¹ The 2nd MG Battalion led the advance in the afternoon, coming under shellfire which combined with a gusty wind to raise clouds of dust, and debussing under MG fire. Then the main part

of the battle group passed through to the south—both panzer regiments, with anti-tank guns (including '88s') and field artillery. Other guns engaged the British artillery and the tanks pressed forward through increasing fire until they broke into the western-most defences of the Buffs. While a fierce exchange of fire was still taking place between the panzers and the defending I tanks and artillery, the German machine-gunners reached the eastern part of the defences, and by the combined efforts of all the whole position was overrun. 'If you do not hear from me again', Lieutenant-Colonel King of [1 Buffs](#) signalled to 5 Indian Brigade in a manner reminiscent of Shuttleworth at [Sidi Rezegh](#), 'you will know that I can no longer communicate.' The utmost gallantry was of no avail against the relentless pressure from the German tanks, field and anti-tank guns, and the machine guns, working as a well-drilled

¹ From enemy documents it would seem that [1 Buffs](#) were actually north-west of Pt 204.

team. All but two of the I tanks were lost, all but one of the field guns, and the infantry held their positions until the tanks were in their midst. The Buffs lost 531 men and only the Quartermaster, the Medical Officer, and 69 other ranks escaped capture. All told more than a thousand men were killed or captured here, and the Germans (by their own estimates) took six I tanks, 25 guns, and a mass of equipment, including over 100 lorries (only about twenty of which, however, remained in working order, the rest being 'shot to pieces or burnt out' ¹).

The Germans were naturally elated and Colonel Menny was all in favour of pushing on to the east and south-east. He would certainly have done so had the composite battalion of 115 Infantry Regiment pushed forward as he repeatedly urged to take over the captured position; but this battalion arrived too late and consolidated instead in a defensive arc covering Menny Battle Group, which bedded down for the night. Thus 3/1 Punjab and 4/6 Rajput Rifles, facing [Alem Hamza](#), were spared the fate of the Buffs. The successes of 5 New Zealand Brigade and the Polish brigade were nevertheless outweighed by this counter-stroke against 5 Indian Brigade.

General Cruewell was well satisfied with the outcome. He felt he could now turn

and tackle the British armour, which was trying to outflank him, without having to look over his shoulder to see how the Italians were faring, and he was confident of success. At 6.55 p.m. on the 15th the Chief of Staff of [Africa Corps](#), Colonel Bayerlein, signalled as follows to the acting GOC of 15 Panzer:

Dear Kriebel,

Send us some of your loot, including cigarettes.

The panzer strength had fallen to a desperately low level, however, and after further fighting next day the division had only eight Pzkw IIIs and three Pzkw IIs, though Ariete still had thirty tanks.

viii

crusader

had already achieved an unsought but enduring success by undermining the confidence in each other of the German and Italian African commands. The Italians found their feet heavy as they began to retrace their weary steps back along the route of defeat they had trodden the previous winter. The last thing they wanted was another such humiliation and they saw no need yet for retreat. To Rommel the need was glaring and he had been furious when General Gambara countermanded his order to Pavia to withdraw from [Tobruk](#). Again on 8 December, when General Bastico called in an alarmed and excitable state, disbelieving that retreat should have to follow so soon after Rommel had proclaimed a victory at [Sidi Rezegh](#), Rommel lost his temper completely. He

¹ Diary of 15 Pz Div.

hurled wild accusations at his Italian associates and indicated that [Gazala](#) might be only a stage in a retreat from the whole of [Cyrenaica](#). This suggested to Bastico and others that the less mobile Italian formations might be sacrificed to save the German troops; but this was less than fair to Rommel. Reluctantly the Italian commanders agreed that the remnants of 90 Light ¹ and some Italian artillery should fall back at once to Ajedabia; but [Gazala](#) was to be firmly held. As early as the 13th,

however, Rommel warned the German and Italian High Commands that he might soon have to pull back to [Derna](#) and [Mechili](#).

[Agheila](#), 300 miles beyond [Derna](#), already had a powerful attraction for Rommel. Covered by salt marshes and other impassable ground, hard to outflank, it had great natural strength and could be held mainly with non-mobile troops. No position between [Gazala](#) and [Agheila](#) could be held without a strong mobile reserve. The appreciations emanating from Rommel's headquarters in mid-December therefore had a gloomy tone, to which Cruewell and his Italian associates objected. Rommel was depressed by dwindling supplies, the battle-weariness of his troops, the ever-present danger of being cut off by strong British mobile forces, and the inevitable loss of the 13,000-odd troops in the frontier area. On the other hand, Cruewell was ready, after overrunning the Buffs, to turn and strike the British armour, and the new commander of the Italian Mobile Corps, General Piazzoni, was in high spirits. Hearing of a move of 4 Armoured Brigade towards [Mechili](#) or [Tmimi](#) ² on the 15th, however, Rommel issued orders in the evening for the [Gazala](#) line to be abandoned.

On the 16th Cavallero and Kesselring joined Bastico and Gambaro in a weighty inquiry into Rommel's intentions. Kesselring was more than half convinced that the Italians were right in wanting to hold on at [Gazala](#). Like Cruewell he thought that Eighth Army was much weakened and must be adversely affected by the dismissal of General Cunningham. Reinforcements for Panzer Group Africa were expected at the end of the month, the [Luftwaffe](#) was already being strengthened, and from a wider viewpoint the entry of [Japan](#) into the war must benefit Axis operations. There was therefore much to be said in favour of playing for time. It was unfortunately too late to halt the withdrawal from [Gazala](#); but Rommel was asked to hold if he could the [Derna](#)- [Mechili](#) line. Further stormy meetings between the leading characters ensued; but Rommel was firmly determined to get back to [Agheila](#) as soon as he could, judging that it would prove more expensive to dawdle than to hurry on this journey.

¹ Which lost its GOC, [Maj-Gen Suemmermann](#), killed in an air raid on the 10th.

² And also of Italian suspicions that a British landing near [Derna](#) was

impending.

Though such a long retreat was a difficult operation, every mile on the way back would ease Axis supply problems and increase those of the British, thus tipping the scales another degree in Rommel's favour. Two companies of German tanks and a battalion of Italian tanks had been sunk on their way to [Libya](#) on the 13th; but two more panzer companies were at sea, one bound for [Tripoli](#) and the other for [Benghazi](#), and they both arrived on the 19th. They were badly needed, for Eighth Army had another armoured brigade at hand (the reconstituted 22 Armoured Brigade) with which to relieve 4 Armoured Brigade as soon as the situation allowed, and another armoured division (the 1st) would soon take over from 7 Armoured Division.

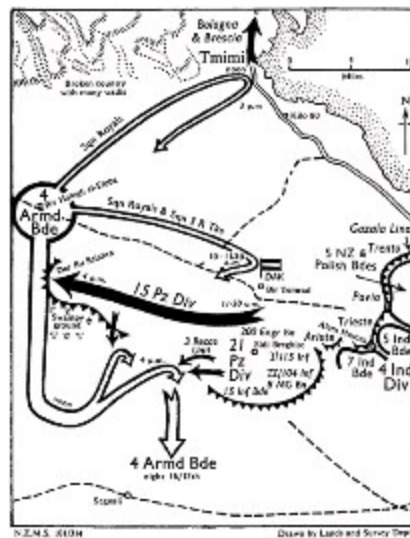
ix

Godwin-Austen had signalled to both Gott and Gatehouse at 7.50 p.m. on 14 December that the British armour would next day have 'such a chance of destroying enemy forces as seldom arises in war'. His orders were therefore simple: 'Smash them relentlessly.' By 3 p.m. on the 15th 4 Armoured Brigade reached Bir Halegh el-Eleba, south-west of [Tmimi](#), and was thus admirably placed for this purpose. The Royals and B Squadron of [3 Royal Tanks](#) moved northwards and engaged enemy who soon withdrew; but the rest of the brigade halted. Godwin-Austen pressed again for early action against the rear of the enemy facing 4 Indian Division, which was 'hard pressed', but Gott objected to any immediate attack on administrative grounds, though he agreed that the brigade should attack at the earliest possible hour next day. Again at 6.50 p.m. Godwin-Austen urged Gott, 'If humanly possible', to cut the enemy's L of C near [Tmimi](#) early on the 16th. Gott replied with some unrecorded objection which Godwin-Austen acknowledged but refused to accept, insisting that 'his wishes remain' and pointing out that 'any aggressive action even if only local will materially affect situation which is now reaching climax.'¹

But Gott had already thrown a spanner in the works by authorising 4 Armoured Brigade to move south early next day, away from the enemy. The B Echelons had been held up by bad going and the brigade would 'facilitate replenishment' by going back to meet its supply lorries. The panzer troops could have told Gott that running

out of petrol on the battlefield need not be so disastrous as he feared; they had done it several times already without dire consequences. There was, moreover, no shortage of ammunition, for most of the 85 to 95 tanks had done little or no fighting for some days.

¹ UK Narrative 4.



A LOST CHANCE, 16 DECEMBER

On the 16th Gatehouse turned about and headed southwards; but before doing so he despatched two detachments to raid the enemy's rear. C Squadron, **3 Royal Tanks**, with a squadron of armoured cars and a troop of anti-tank guns, made an extremely bold thrust at the Battle Headquarters of **Africa Corps** near Bir Temrad,¹ causing much confusion and alarm, and another armoured-car squadron raided **Tmimi**. Had the whole brigade acted in like manner (and

¹ See Crisp, pp. 203–14, and Joly, *Take These Men*, pp. 249–61. Crisp commanded C Sqn, 3 R Tks, until he was wounded, when Joly took over.

in the afternoon of the 15th rather than the morning of the 16th) crusader

might well have been brought to a victorious conclusion in a matter of hours.

The 18 miles 4 Armoured Brigade moved in the morning, had they been to the north instead of the south, would have put it within a mile or two of [Tmimi](#). Godwin-Austen's vision was correct; but its fulfilment was denied by this southward move, which nullified all hope of decisive action.

In the afternoon [15 Panzer Division](#) cut across the rear of 4 Armoured Brigade and stood at Der Bu Sciahra, covered by swampy ground to the south. After replenishing, the British armour headed north-eastwards towards Sidi Breghisc to guard the exposed flank of 4 Indian Division and Godwin-Austen and Ritchie understood that it duly arrived there. But Gatehouse in fact met stern opposition, first from 3 Reconnaissance Unit (reinforced with '88s' and other guns) and then from elements of both panzer divisions; he lost ten tanks, and ended the day a dozen miles south-west of his destination. All danger to the Indian division disappeared, however, when the German armour moved west. As a 'fleet in being' 4 Armoured Brigade by its move to Halegh el-Eleba had caused Rommel to give up the [Gazala](#) line; but the chance of destroying Panzer Group where it stood was lost. Eighth Army now had to prepare for an arduous pursuit across [Cyrenaica](#), in the course of which it would grow weaker while the enemy gained in comparative strength. Ritchie ordered Godwin-Austen at 10.55 p.m. on the 16th to 'Do all you can to prevent escape'; but it was too late.

x

Meanwhile 5 New Zealand Brigade and the Polish Carpathian Brigade continued their efforts to break through the [Gazala](#) line and met strong opposition. For the first time the Maoris struck dogged resistance when a platoon of A Company attacked Point 137, a mile and a half north of the existing FDLs at Point 154, at first light on the 16th. Another Maori platoon and one from 22 Battalion gave support, but only 1200 yards were gained when the troops were forced to halt and dig in on inhospitable ground. There they were shelled, machine-gunned, and mortared incessantly; but they held on. At the end of the day 16 Maoris had been killed and 33 wounded, most of them in an impulsive charge by A Company.

At the same time A Company of 22 Battalion attacked but failed to seize enemy posts east of Bir en-Naghia. No men were lost, however, and the field guns then concentrated on these posts and kept them quiet. C Company of the 22nd gave long-

range supporting fire to the Poles as they continued their advance, gradually gaining ground until by evening they had reached Gabr er-Reghem, some three miles westwards along the escarpment. What looked like an incipient counter-attack against the Maoris from the north-west in the morning was quickly broken up by 1 RHA and 5 Field Regiment. Later much transport was seen to the west moving in a manner that suggested a withdrawal was taking place. After dark the Poles attacked Bir en-Naghia with support from C Company of the 22nd and took it at the point of the bayonet, finding it well fortified with concrete works and diggings, and another large haul of prisoners resulted. Next morning, after some bickering between 4 Indian Division and a handful of rearguard troops, it became apparent that the enemy had gone.

The battalions of 5 Brigade soon found they had nothing to fear but mines and the carriers of 23 Battalion reached Kilo 80 on the road to [Derna](#), nearly 20 miles past the [Gazala](#) line, by the early afternoon. There they came under shellfire, made contact with the Poles, and soon afterwards were recalled.

Later the whole of the brigade was ordered to concentrate at Bir el-Geff, east of [Alem Hamza](#), where it was to contribute its troop-carrying transport (4 RMT Company) to help supply 22 Guards Brigade on the latter's long-awaited dash across the desert to cut off the enemy's retreat. As soon as other transport became available the New Zealand brigade would return to [Baggush](#).

When the troops learned this on 18 December they were disappointed. They had looked forward to seeing the campaign through to its end and this unexpected news was bitterly unwelcome. There could be no appeal against this decision, however; Eighth Army could not commit for the pursuit more troops than it could supply across the huge tracts of desert between [Gazala](#) and [El Agheila](#). [General Freyberg](#), moreover, was anxious for 5 Brigade to be returned to his division.

After four days of salvage work and maintenance 5 Brigade handed in (to an Ordnance depot at [Tobruk](#)) Bren guns, anti-tank rifles, and other war stores, retaining only 10 per cent of 'war establishment' for training purposes. Then on the 23rd the brigade moved back to [El Adem](#), leaving there on Christmas Day in supply lorries, entering Egypt near Libyan Sheferzen on Boxing Day in a blinding sandstorm, splitting into a road and a rail party on the 27th, and in the afternoon and evening of

the 29th reaching [Baggush](#), where it was warmly welcomed by the rest of the New Zealand Division.

x

The New Zealand troops left in [Tobruk](#) had long since rejoined the Division at [Baggush](#): 18 Battalion, Dudaforce of 19 Battalion, two New Zealand anti-tank guns and a detachment of the Ammunition Company had departed on the 11th and reached [Baggush](#) two days later; and 'X' Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, having fired thousands of Bofors and [Breda](#) rounds in defence of the [Tobruk](#) airfields, detached its RA troops, handed in its guns, and reached [Baggush](#) on Christmas Day. Except for Divisional Cavalry, 4 and 6 RMT Companies, and minor detachments, the Division was therefore reunited before the end of the year and the LOBs (in the case of the 6 Brigade battalions and 20 Battalion a substantial part of the remaining strength) rejoined their units. Mail was distributed, memorial services were held for the many who had not come back, and letters and cablegrams were sent to ease the anxieties of relatives and friends at home. Then for the first time since crossing the Libyan frontier on 18 November, the men could relax in mind and body, and they saw the New Year in in such lively fashion that the [Royal Navy](#) was prompted to inquire if an enemy landing was under way at [Baggush](#). ¹

x

Both RMT companies remained in the field, the 6th serving the troops besieging the frontier forts and the 4th acting as general carrier, chiefly for 22 Guards Brigade. With attached tanks, reconnaissance troops, and artillery this force, called Bencol, set out on 20 December with memories of Beda Fomm, intending to cut off the enemy's retreat between [Benghazi](#) and Ajedabia. On the same day Force E of the Oases Group was at last able to set out from Jalo on a similar mission. Wilson and Currie Columns skirted the southern slopes of the Green Mountain en route to [Benghazi](#) in conjunction with the rest of the Support Group, and 4 Indian Division pushed on along the coast through rain and mud and over badly-worn roads with mined verges. All were pursuing or trying to trap the retreating enemy. Next day the [Special Air Service](#) with help from the LRDG raided the airfield at Ajedabia and destroyed 37 aircraft and an ammunition dump. Then came a sharp riposte. On the

23rd the panzers counter-attacked from Beda Fomm and drove back 3 Royal Tanks and a squadron of 2 Royal Gloucestershire Hussars with heavy loss, and two Jock Columns met strong opposition some miles north of there. The Germans had quickly put into service the tank company which landed at [Benghazi](#) on the 19th and it was soon evident that there would be no repetition of the relatively easy success scored against the Italians in this area a year before. The margin between success and failure was nevertheless narrow: [Benghazi](#) fell on the 24th, and without their panzer reinforcements the Germans would have been hard put to it to cover the withdrawal to Ajedabia, where 90 Light Division had been preparing defences for the past ten days.

¹ See Scoullar, Chaps. 1 and 2.



PURSUIT ACROSS CYRENAICA, DECEMBER 1941 — JANUARY 1942

'Hope your cols are relentlessly pressing on', Godwin-Austen signalled to 22 Guards Brigade in the evening of 24 December; 'You have unique chance. Hustle everyone.' Then an LO brought disappointing news and half an hour later another and firmer signal was sent: '.... Get round everything you hesitate to face. Order everyone who has failed to progress by day to regain progress by night. Report personally to me any unenterprising commander who will be instantly removed.... I cannot tolerate stickiness especially at such a time....' This kind of language was long overdue in Eighth Army; but in this case it missed the mark. The Guards brigade

could scarcely dictate terms to an enemy who was ready with a strong panzer counter-thrust whenever the situation required.

The balance of strength by the time Eighth Army reached Ajedabia was not nearly so unfavourable to the enemy as Ritchie and Godwin-Austen supposed. All enemy formations had successfully withdrawn with comparatively small loss. A weak attack by 2 Scots Guards on 27 December was easily repulsed. Then [Africa Corps](#), with 70 tanks and strong artillery, struck at 22 Armoured Brigade (which had 90 tanks) and drove it back 30 miles with heavy loss of tanks as well as of dignity. The enemy 'had a/tk guns right up with their tanks', the diarist of 4 CLY complained (after further fighting on 30 December) as though this were a novelty. The anti-tank guns 'seemed to appear from nowhere.' By the end of that day the brigade had lost 68 tanks and was left with only 30 in fighting order. Thus 22 Armoured Brigade, which had been withdrawn to refit after the first ten days of crusader, was soon incapacitated for the second time. The 1st Armoured Division now took over from 7 Armoured Division; but one of its armoured brigades was already out of action and 2 Armoured Brigade could not reach the scene until 4 January.

Despite this success, Rommel was careful not to overplay his hand at this stage and between the 1st and the 6th he withdrew to a line from Marsa el Brega to [Marada](#), covering [Agheila](#), which could not easily be outflanked. The policy of Eighth Army was to press on as soon as possible with acrobat, an offensive to follow crusader and occupy [Tripolitania](#), and on 15 January Auchinleck estimated that this should start between 10 and 15 February. To facilitate the 'build-up' the front was lightly manned, and 4 Indian Division (with only two brigades) and the newly-arrived 2 Armoured Brigade were held back where they could more easily be supplied.

At Agheila Panzer Group meanwhile received some seventy-odd more tanks (mostly of an improved design) from [Tripoli](#), its air strength in the forward area became considerably greater than that of the [RAF](#), and Rommel's staff officers managed with some difficulty to persuade him to stage a 'spoiling attack', which he did on 21 January. ¹ Next day the Germans re-entered Ajedabia, Rommel's enthusiasm returned, and the operation blossomed out into a full-scale counter-offensive. There followed many tortuous manoeuvres

¹ Such reductance did not fit the popular view and even so experienced a judge as the Middle East Director of Military Intelligence remarked in his 'Weekly Military News-letter' that Rommel had 'proved once more his inability to sit still'.

in 13 Corps ¹ as an unusually hesitant Rommel pressed forward until he came upon a new line Eighth Army was forming from [Gazala](#) southwards to [Bir Hacheim](#). The opposing armies had fought each other to a standstill and for the next three months they faced across a wide no-man's land which gradually filled up with mines and barbed wire. In the three weeks from the start of the Axis 'spoiling attack' 13 Corps lost 1390 men, 72 tanks, and 40 field guns, while the enemy losses were slight.

crusader

had ended; but

acrobat

faded out of sight. The next major move, as it happened, was made by Rommel and took him to [Tobruk](#) and then to [Alamein](#).

crusader was a victory nevertheless, and Eighth Army had been granted in its first campaign the hard-earned pleasures of a pursuit over mile after mile of road or desert track littered with equipment and stores, the local triumphs of entering as conqueror one Italian settlement after another, and the collecting of many a bedraggled cluster of prisoners. The [RAF](#) ground staffs counted with satisfaction more than 400 enemy aircraft left behind, many of them at the main airfield at [Benina](#)—more than counter-balancing the 300 or so British aircraft lost in nearly 12,000 crusader sorties (including those from [Malta](#)). By far the largest source of prisoners, however, was the frontier line, where the enemy garrisons were ordered to hold out as long as they could to obstruct the supply of Eighth Army and delay the pursuit, a lonely and dismal task, vital though it was to Rommel.

xiii

The frontier garrisons were supplied on a most meagre scale by submarine and

aircraft and a very occasional surface craft. They had fair stocks of ammunition but little water, except at [Bardia](#), and inadequate rations. Casualties were evacuated in a hospital ship and officer prisoners went to [Italy](#) by submarine (Brigadier Hargest among them), but there were well over 1000 other ranks held prisoner in [Bardia](#) and they had to be guarded and fed. Eighth Army reached Ajedabia before [Bardia](#) fell, however, and it was not until Panzer Group was assembling for its counter-stroke from [Agheila](#) that the [Halfaya](#) garrison surrendered.

This long delay in opening up the coast road for supplies, releasing I tanks and artillery for the fighting in the west, and carrying the desert railway on from [Misheifa](#) to a new Railhead in the [Capuzzo](#) area was damaging to Eighth Army. Had the frontier forts been captured quickly, Ritchie would have been able to establish and maintain forces facing [Agheila](#) strong enough to discourage the

¹ In one of which a detachment of [4 RMT Coy](#) was surrounded near [Benghazi](#). Most of the NZ drivers were captured; but three of them escaped on foot. (See Henderson, [RMT](#), pp. 154–65.)

'spoiling attack' by Panzer Group. But troops committed elsewhere could not simultaneously attack [Bardia](#), and there was good reason to concentrate at [Gazala](#) in mid-December to knock out the enemy armour. Even in the ensuing pursuit Ritchie and Godwin-Austen still hoped to achieve this vital aim, and the frontier operations had to take second place.

Meanwhile General Norrie, who on 12 December was given the task of opening up the coast road, had to make do with the inexperienced [2 South African Division](#) (with 2 Brigade of [1 South African Division](#) under its command) and was ordered not to incur heavy losses. All-out attacks against the strong defences of [Bardia](#) and [Halfaya](#) would certainly prove costly and were forbidden (because of the difficulty of obtaining South African reinforcements, according to Auchinleck). Ritchie was confident that 'the object can be achieved without this' and had instructed the South African Major-General de Villiers accordingly on 7 December. He felt that if the outlying strongpoints, 'Cova', 'd'Avanca' and [Bir Ghirba](#), were denied water they would soon yield, and in fact their garrisons slipped away between the 10th and 12th and entered the extensive [Halfaya](#) position.

Attention then centered on [Bardia](#), which was considered vulnerable. Its 17-mile perimeter seemed longer than could be effectively manned by the two infantry battalions with supporting artillery, MMGs, and perhaps two Oasis Companies and a few tanks which comprised the garrison as then estimated. An attack, intended to be exploratory, was therefore mounted on the 16th—Dingaan's Day—by 3 South African Brigade, with the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry and a medium artillery battery under its command. Resistance proved to be extremely lively, however, and the attacking force lost some sixty men before the operation was called off on the 17th.

In Divisional Cavalry, south of [Menastir](#), the feeling grew that 'the Regiment is not doing much good here'. Then came Christmas Day: 'Those who had put by some food managed a reasonable Xmas dinner', the unit diarist noted; 'for the improvident it was bully beef and biscuits.' The South Africans were generous, however, in sharing the contents of their food parcels. Thirty lorries of 6 RMT Company set out this day, as on every other day recently, from the company's bivouac near the desert Railhead, with supplies for the troops at the frontier. The rest of the company 'celebrated a dusty, gritty Christmas in "the hell-hole of the desert"', [Bir Abu Misheifa](#).¹

¹ Henderson, [RMT](#), p. 157.



FRONTIER OPERATIONS, 16 DECEMBER 1941 — 17 JANUARY 1942

A second and heavier attack on [Bardia](#) started on New Year's Eve, after careful

preparation in the course of which two Divisional Cavalry squadrons drove tanks round and round a circuit, only part of which was visible to the enemy, to simulate a massing of armour to the north-west. Like a dramatic chorus the light tanks were continually crossing the stage and returning back-stage, and, if not deceived, the enemy was at least interested enough to shell the two squadrons. For further deception fifteen dummy Stuart tanks were stationed near the [Via Balbia](#) outside [Bardia](#) on the night of the 30th and a Cavalry carrier troop provided the 'noises off'—'stopping, starting, changing gears, etc.'¹ Then on the 31st a troop of real Stuarts led by Lieutenant [Reeves](#)² threaded backwards and forwards among the dummy tanks firing 37-millimetre guns and Brownings at intervals and attracting much fire at the dummies. A smoke screen laid across the front as though the dummy tanks were preparing to attack drew sustained MG fire from the defences. In the afternoon of the 31st Divisional Cavalry, less a squadron and plus a company of South African infantry, harassed the perimeter defences from the escarpment near [Menastir](#) to the sea.

These were only side-shows, however, to distract attention from the main attack, which followed its methodical course. Aerial bombing and fire from medium and field guns had helped to soften the defences and the main break-in operation was mounted east of the road to [Capuzzo](#).

The fighting on 31 December was heavier than expected. The South African infantry gained most of their first objective with the help of two I-tank squadrons, but a battalion headquarters was overrun in a counter-attack and there were several local withdrawals. The next step was after dark on 1–2 January 1942, when Colonel Yeo of 44 Royal Tanks, with memories of his night advance from [Zaafran](#) to Ed Duda, despatched two of his squadrons in moonlight ahead of two infantry battalions to seize the second objective. Against long-prepared and well-defended positions, however, Yeo had a very different task. The tanks had to wait some hours for the infantry and in the course of this met some opposition. The following infantry were fiercely opposed, suffered considerable loss, and could not get up to the I tanks. But the end was in sight. Flares, rockets, and explosions behind the enemy lines pointed to impending surrender and the morning soon confirmed this.

Dawn on 2 January was strangely quiet and B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry,

could get no response to the bursts of fire it directed at various points along its eight miles of front, though there was much

¹ Div Cav diary.

² Lt J. W. Reeves, MC; born NZ 15 Aug 1907; farmer; killed in action 16 Dec 1942.

smoke rising to the enemy's rear and a 'violent pyrotechnic display'. ¹ Lieutenant Kerr ² of B Squadron therefore investigated and his troop of three tanks quickly gathered 200 prisoners, all of them with 'Kits and bundles made up and just waiting'. ³ Kerr was invited to drive along the [Via Balbia](#) into the fortress to meet a senior officer and did so, but his tank shed both tracks at a corner and there was some delay until his second tank came forward. The German sergeant who acted as guide was nervous about the mines at the verge, but another two miles were successfully negotiated and Kerr found himself face to face with Major-General Schmitt. 'My troops have surrendered', the GOC of East Sector announced, and he went on to say that they had tried to do so during the night but 'the English did not understand.'

Kerr was now asked to go to the southern sector and explain that the garrison had ceased to resist. He was a young officer in a novel situation and unversed in protocol and he accepted this commission. After driving a short distance, however, he came upon Lieutenant-Colonel Butler-Porter, CO of 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry, who was bound for Schmitt's headquarters with orders to bring Schmitt to surrender unconditionally to General de Villiers by 10 a.m. Kerr soon realised that his prior dealings with Schmitt were unwelcome and that he was not needed, so he returned to B Squadron.

B Squadron had meanwhile been most anxious to enter [Bardia](#). Hundreds of New Zealanders, including some men of Divisional Cavalry, were believed to be held prisoner there and the squadron badly wanted to get in touch with them. Soon after 10 a.m. permission was given and the squadron streamed along the road at full speed, reached the township just behind a provost detachment, and soon found the prisoner-of-war compound ('Just heaps of rock on a bare hillside, very bleak and colder at night than winter in Taranaki' ⁴) with over 1000 ex-prisoners. All were

famished and the Christmas parcels (which had belatedly reached Divisional Cavalry) and spare rations of B Squadron were quickly distributed. Then two lorry-loads of rations were collected from a supply dump and distributed among the bearded and shrunken men who had endured seven cold and hungry weeks of captivity, continually menaced by bombing and shelling.⁵ Next day transport arrived to pick up the prisoners and carry them on the first stage of their journey back to Base. Many

¹ Maj J. H. Garland, OC B Sqn.

² Maj E. W. Kerr, ED; Cave; born NZ 24 May 1908; farmer.

³ Garland.

⁴ As described by the Rev. C. G. Palmer, the only officer who remained with the prisoners, to the ubiquitous Brig Clifton ([The Happy Hunted](#), p. 160).

⁵ Only one bomb burst near enough to cause casualties, however, and one man was killed and four were wounded by it.

of those who had been captured at [Sidi Azeiz](#), heedless or unaware of their emaciated appearance, were ludicrously anxious to rejoin their units at once rather than be sent to the rear. All told, there were 1171 prisoners released, 650 of them New Zealanders.

The total captured (including wounded and sick), far greater than expected, was 7982, including 1804 Germans. Casualties on the British side, including Divisional Cavalry (2 wounded), were some 140 killed and 300 wounded—figures which would probably have been smaller still but for the inadequate training of the South African infantry and deficiencies in their equipment, especially in automatic weapons. The water pumping station, a most important installation, was taken intact, though fused for demolition, and some 35 field, medium and coast guns, some of them serviceable, were also taken, as well as two '88s'. Ammunition was plentiful, ration stocks were not as low as had been expected, and the garrison was by no means in

the dire straits which intercepted signals to Panzer Group had suggested.

General de Villiers no longer had to stretch his troops along the extensive [Bardia](#) defences and was able to close in on the [Halfaya](#), [Sollum](#), 'Faltenbache' and 'Cirener' positions. He did not now need Divisional Cavalry, and this regiment was therefore detached on 6 January and returned to [Baggush](#) with a warm testimonial from the South African GOC. The only New Zealand unit now involved was 6 RMT Company, which continued to run its thirty lorries per day between Railhead and the frontier until the end of the month. Early in February it was called on to carry 5 New Zealand Brigade to [El Adem](#); but crusader had long since ended. ¹

In the meantime the remaining frontier posts were overcome. The seizure of [Sollum](#) on 12 January by 2 Transvaal Scottish removed the last local source of water for the [Halfaya](#) garrison, the four Ju52s which dropped supplies each night could not maintain so large a force in this essential commodity, and on the 17th Major-General de Giorgis surrendered this last garrison, with 2126 Germans and 3413 Italians. The mainstay of the defence, however, had been Major Bach of I Battalion, 104 Infantry Regiment, a German pastor, who had held the [Halfaya](#) defences firmly and skilfully and might have resisted much longer had de Giorgis not brought in his large retinue from [Bir Ghirba](#), 'Cova' and 'd'Avanca' and placed an insupportable strain on supplies.

¹ See Scoullar, pp. 20–1. The non-divisional NZ entities—'T' Air Support Control Sigs, 'A' a 'B' FMCs, and 'X' Water Issue Sec—remained in 13 Corps until March or later.

In all 13,842 prisoners were taken in the frontier area in December and January, apart from those captured by 5 New Zealand Brigade from Geissler Column at [Menastir](#). The release of seventy-five British troops held at [Halfaya](#) brought the total of prisoners freed to 1246. Casualties in 30 Corps in the whole phase of operations were fewer than 600. A heavy attack in preparation (by South Africans and a newly-arrived Free French brigade) was not now required and crusader thus ended in a minor anti-climax, though a welcome one.

General Freyberg had meanwhile been settling many administrative issues, advising the [New Zealand Government](#) on various matters, and providing for the needs of troops at [Baggush](#) and in [Cyrenaica](#). Regarding the use of 5 Brigade, he also had a sharp disagreement with General Auchinleck.

When [Freyberg](#) saw Ritchie in the frontier area after leaving [Zaafran](#) he agreed that 5 Brigade, 18 Battalion and Dudaforce of 19 Battalion, and the NZA detachments in [Tobruk](#) should remain under Ritchie's command. But they were 'not to be committed to active operations.'¹ The New Zealand Division had suffered heavy loss, the full extent of which was not yet known,² and it could not afford further costly operations. This stipulation was also made to Brigadier Wilder when he called at [Divisional Headquarters](#) on his way to take command of 5 Brigade. Then, without [Freyberg's](#) knowledge, Wilder was put under General Godwin-Austen's command for operations west of [Tobruk](#).

In asking for 5 Brigade, Godwin-Austen had in mind a hard fight (at [El Adem](#) or [Gazala](#)) and then a pursuit, and there was no knowing on 9 December (when the 13 Corps Commander learned from Wilder of the restriction on the use of this brigade) what 'wastage' this would entail. He therefore signalled urgently to Ritchie:

Comd 5 NZ Bde has personal instructions from [Gen FREYBERG](#) to the effect that his Bde is not to be engaged on army operations in which heavy casualties may be expected. While bearing this in mind I propose continuing employ Bde on tasks already contemplated but feel you should know above.

Ritchie referred this to Auchinleck (who was still with him) and the C-in-C saw [Freyberg](#) on this matter in [Cairo](#) the next day. The meeting was stiff and [Freyberg](#) was much upset. Auchinleck took strong exception to [Freyberg's](#) briefing of Wilder. As the Middle

¹ [Freyberg](#) to Auchinleck, 11 Dec.

² There was no certainty that the patients and staff of the MDS near Pt 175 and the prisoners in [Bardia](#) (over 2000 men altogether) would be recovered.

East CGS, General Arthur Smith, wrote the same day to [Freyberg](#) in an explanatory (and conciliatory) letter, the C-in-C 'had you in for one thing, viz. to ensure you do not give orders to your Bde comdrs which will interfere with orders from their immediate commanders. You agreed this was quite right'.

All the tact in the world was needed and [Freyberg](#) preferred to think the matter over before commenting. In the terms of his orders from the [New Zealand Government](#), [Freyberg](#) had to do what he had done. It was improper for Eighth Army to commit a New Zealand brigade independently to a new phase of operations without consulting him. On the other hand, to all the officers concerned—Godwin-Austen, Ritchie and Auchinleck—the success of crusader was an overriding consideration. An immediate and fleeting opportunity was presented at [Tobruk](#) and then at [Gazala](#) of striking the decisive blow and ending the campaign. To strike with less than the greatest weight and fullest enthusiasm was to put success in sorry jeopardy. [Freyberg](#), who could see this as well as his military superiors, was painfully torn by his conflicting loyalties to the [Middle East Command](#) and the [New Zealand Government](#). In the end, however, he found in favour of the latter; for he had no real choice. The issue was a recurring one, the conflict fundamental; but for the first time [Freyberg](#) had to face it in the razor-sharp form it assumed when battle was raging and victory still in doubt.

The matter of losses already incurred was at the heart of this dispute. It seems that Ritchie and Auchinleck, though aware that 5 Brigade Headquarters had been overrun, had no idea how large this was and how numerous the men involved; they knew little of the fighting at [Capuzzo](#) and [Menastir](#), and they did not link the heavy casualties in 21 Battalion (and 47 Field Battery) at [Sidi Rezegh](#) with those of the rest of the brigade. [Freyberg](#) therefore sent Auchinleck a letter on the 11th formally requesting to know 'how they [5 Brigade] are being employed and under whose orders they are' and at the same time discussing the losses so far sustained in that brigade, which he estimated at between 1000 and 2000 and nearer the latter. He added that 'the lack of HQ organisation is serious' and 'the efficiency of [the] Bde Gp has been greatly impaired.' In a postscript he undertook to write again on the main features of the dispute.

Then he sent a letter to Auchinleck next day, 12 December, stating his case:

I have now had time to go into the facts as I promised on the 11th and in doing so I have tried as far as I can, to see if the criticism levelled against me was merited. I have tried to find points of agreement with your charge rather than concentrate on points of obvious disagreement which I shall not refer to.

The only controversial point that arises is the question of the employment of the 5 NZ Bde Gp. I know that you think I placed restrictions on the use of the 5 Bde Gp without reference to higher authority. If that had been the case I agree that I would have been entirely in the wrong. I am fully aware, however, of the normal channels of command and have always adhered to them.

I did not attempt to answer the charge brought against me at our interview because I did not know the facts, and as you passed judgement upon me without asking me for my side of the case, I felt that it would be better to do so in writing.

I think, if you will carry your mind back to the evening of 3rd December, you may recall the following facts. You, the Army Commander and I met in the office truck after tea at Adv 8 Army [Headquarters] to discuss the lessons of the fighting. It was just before I left for the rear area. At the end of the meeting, and in your presence, the Army Commander said, 'I shall need the 5 NZ Bde and I am going to ask you to leave them behind.' I agreed to this, but said that in view of the heavy casualties we had suffered, I would be relieved if he could see that the 5 Bde was not used in further offensive operations. He said he would want them for 'columns', and this was also agreed to. I further said that I should be glad if he would see that the 18 Bn and part of the 19 Bn of the 4 Inf Bde, who were in [Tobruk](#), were not committed to any attack, and I understood that he would send a telegram to that effect. My GSO 1, to whom I communicated these facts after the discussion, bears me out as to time and place and as to the results of the meeting as understood by me and passed on to him.

I cannot pass any comment about my Brigadier's attitude, because I have not yet had any touch with him. My instructions, however, when he went forward to take over command, were precise. I told him that in view of our heavy

casualties it had been agreed between the Army Commander and myself that he was not going to be used for offensive action. I told him that he would have plenty of activity as he would have to send out columns to harass and mop up enemy pockets West of [Bardia](#). I also warned him against attempting any attack by daylight without a full quota of supporting arms.

These are the facts to the best of my recollection, and I think you will find them substantially accurate. Under the circumstances I cannot say that I am conscious of being in the wrong.

Now that you have defined the position to me, I shall in future refer all questions affecting our employment to you. I trust that this action will not be misunderstood by my immediate chiefs.

Other disputes occurred at the same time regarding the use of the part of the Divisional Petrol Company which was in [Tobruk](#) and also of 4 RMT Company. All were settled amicably in the end and the New Zealand transport was used as fully as possible to help Eighth Army. [Freyberg](#) was angry, however, about an order given by 13 Corps to the CRASC, Colonel Crump, to hand over the Petrol Company lorries to the Polish brigade, and also the drivers, to form a composite ASC unit. 'We have taken two years to train Division and expect to be ready to resume active operations in month', he signalled to Advanced Eighth Army on the 10th. 'We are quite willing in this emergency that our ASC units should be used complete but will resist any efforts to cannibalise them.'

On the 14th Auchinleck sympathetically acknowledged a further estimate from [Freyberg](#) of losses in 5 Brigade and wrote that this brigade would be returned to the Division as soon as Ritchie could relieve it. 'As you know, we are pretty thin on the ground ... for maintenance reasons', he pointed out. 'At the same time, it is absolutely essential that we should keep up pressure on the enemy.' Then on the 15th he answered [Freyberg's](#) letter of the 12th in a friendly manner, accepting 'unreservedly your explanation that you believed in all good faith that you had made your opinion on the subject of the employment of your 5th Brigade clear to the Army Commander.' There had been no way of relieving that brigade and at the same time keeping up pressure on the enemy; but it would be withdrawn at the first opportunity. Already it had 'done most valuable work, capturing prisoners and

containing large enemy forces which would otherwise have been free to attack the 4th Indian Division on its flank.' Finally Auchinleck wrote:

I would like to thank you for your very straight-forward and soldierly letter.

This was merely one of a series of disagreements large and small about detaching parts of 2 NZEF, and particularly of the New Zealand Division. But it had a further and deeper significance in that, unlike the use (or misuse) of ASC and other service units, it entailed committing fighting units to action and perhaps losing many lives, a matter on which Freyberg was directly answerable to the New Zealand Government. The next in the series was an argument about the use of 5 Brigade in a projected seaborne attack in the Gulf of Sirte. ¹

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After several cables about details of crusader campaign and its repercussions in 2 NZEF, Freyberg wrote two personal letters to Mr Fraser on 18 December. In one of them he mentioned the trouble about detaching New Zealand units which made him appear in some quarters 'as a Fifth Columnist'. ² In the other he reassured the Prime Minister about the excellence of the air support as compared with Greece and Crete, deplored the loss of senior officers including Miles and Hargest, and told of his visit to General Cunningham before the battle started, when he prophesied that the New Zealand Division would be asked to march to Tobruk and said he wanted it to go, if it had to, as a full division. ³ Then he summarised the battle:

¹ See Scoullar, pp. 11–14.

² See p. 29, note 4.

³ See p. 41.

The [crusader] plan ... was a very good one & up to a point it had been brilliantly carried out. The move by night ... was well done and the attack started as a surprise. ... When the true facts of the Armoured battle were known to us close to Bardia they [30 Corps] were in a grave difficulty. The question of withdrawal was I believe

mentioned. That would have been tragic. Especially as so far we had not been engaged. Somebody had to fight the Germans and it fell to our lot. We could either wait for them to attack us or go for him near [TOBRUK](#). We advanced quickly by night and stuck at him and drove his infantry back at the same moment as Rommel made his outflanking movement to the south. It was as well we did so and I feel History will say the New Zealand Division fought the Germans to a standstill and in so doing saved what was developing into a nasty situation for us.

This hastily written letter was followed in due course by a fuller account and then by a fifty-page report which was printed (with deletions stipulated by Auchinleck ¹) for limited circulation in New Zealand and in [2 NZEF](#). In this he concluded that surprise was the 'outstanding factor in achieving success' and that 'Night attacks and night advances often offer the best chances' of attaining it. Infantry tanks 'can and should be used in attacks at night'; but they should always have the maximum supporting fire from other arms and close infantry co-operation. A dispersion between vehicles of 200 yards was generally too great, he felt, 100 yards was 'satisfactory', and 50–60 yards had not caused 'undue casualties during artillery bombardment'. Having described the withdrawal from [Zaafran](#) on 1–2 December, [Freyberg](#) summed up:

So ended the New Zealand part of the battle to keep the [Tobruk Corridor](#) open. This battle in the [Western Desert](#) was not primarily however a battle to hold positions, but a battle to destroy the German forces. I believe we went some distance towards achieving this in our attacks at [Sidi Rezegh](#), [Belhamed](#), and Ed Duda. I think the German Afrika Korps will bear me out in this!

Some months afterwards he wrote more critically of crusader. The enemy at [Tobruk](#) and again at [Gazala](#) 'should have been caught like a rat in a trap.'² Later still he commented:

The British artillery was the best-trained and best-commanded part of the British Army. They could move and fight. They were being wasted [in the Brigade Group Battle].³

Mistakes and failures arising from inexperience occurred as much within the New Zealand Division as in other formations which had to get used to desert conditions

and the fast tempo of operations the panzer troops imposed. Even the Germans had been bewildered by the breathless pace of events in the first few days. But Auchinleck's refusal to let [Freyberg](#) criticise in print the dispersion of effort in Eighth Army and the mishandling of I tanks indicated

¹ See Scoullar, p. 5.

² Report on NZ Division in [Syria](#) (undated).

³ Comments on my narrative, 1952.

that wrong-thinking in the [Middle East](#) was deeply entrenched. ¹ Senior officers in [Cairo](#) continued to talk a tactical language quite foreign to [Freyberg's](#) and made him apprehensive of the future.

[Freyberg](#) had clearly foreseen some of the main features of the crusader fighting. He had emphasised before and during the battle the need to concentrate on relieving [Tobruk](#), he had been certain that the Germans could not be beaten by manoeuvre alone and would have to be fought to a standstill, 'in the end ruthlessly', ² and he had even predicted Rommel's 'evil dream'. As he approached the frontier he had noted uneasily how strong the Germans were in anti-tank guns; but he did not foresee what a disastrous effect these would have on the British armour.

The catastrophic tank losses in the opening phase of crusader had caused the guns and infantry of Eighth Army, usually with I-tank support, to bear the brunt of the offensive in later phases. The complex struggle that developed, with its bewildering fluctuations of fortune, reflected no great credit at the command level on either side and it was not by and large a generals' battle. The general who showed up best of all was perhaps Neumann-Silkow of 15 Panzer, the pacemaker in one of the fastest-moving battles in history until he was struck down on 6 December. His calm eye, viewing the fighting mostly at close quarters, saw it as whole and the vigour of his leadership was exemplary. In Eighth Army none did better than [Freyberg](#), whose determination not to leave his 6 Brigade in the lurch and, when he reached it, to push on with his two-brigade division to join hands with [Tobruk](#), left an

indelible imprint on the campaign. ³

The merit of [Freyberg](#)'s performance, particularly in the early hours of 1 December when he faced the imminent destruction of his force and was yet firmly resolved to hold on, must be judged in the light of his deeply-felt responsibilities to his men and to New Zealand. He had set out on crusader believing that a third costly failure after [Greece](#) and [Crete](#) might shatter the spirit of the New Zealand Division and perhaps cause [2 NZEF](#) to be disbanded, with social, political and sentimental repercussions of which he could scarcely bear to think. Neither by voice nor demeanour, however, did he disclose these cares to those around him. His loyalty to Eighth Army on this occasion made the later disagreement about the use of [5 Brigade](#) all the more painful.

¹ See [Scoullar](#), Chap. 1.

² Address to officers of NZ Div at the assembly area, 14 Nov (See p. 69). In the end it was a manoeuvre—the move of [4 Armd Bde](#) towards [Tmimi](#)—which caused Rommel to abandon the [Gazala](#) line; but this was only the straw which broke the camel's back.

³ In the crisis after the defeat of the British armour the personal example of Auchinleck was admirable. But Rommel's capricious mishandling of his mobile forces on 24–27 Nov flattered Auchinleck's judgment.

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Eighth Army in its first campaign, like the French early in the First World War, fought with superb élan. The spirit of the British cruiser tank units in the opening clashes, unavailing though all too often it was for tactical and technical reasons, was magnificent. At the same time a battle designed around armour was adorned with some of the finest infantry assaults in the annals of the British Army. The attacks of the Black Watch on 'Tiger' in the break-out from [Tobruk](#) and of the 60th Rifles at [Sidi Rezegh](#), the hard fight for Point 175, and the last relentless night advance on the Mosque showed what men could do with little or nothing more than the weapons they could carry. They deserve to be remembered.

The New Zealand Division, in the opinion of one well-qualified observer (supported by many others), entered crusader 'at the peak of its fighting form'. Later it became more skilful, 'especially in the higher ranks, and was probably more effective', but it is doubtful that 'it ever fought again with the same fury and determination as it did in that short and confused campaign'. ¹

Despite this, many New Zealanders concluded from the conduct of the desert war that, as they often put it, 'Jerry' was a 'good joker'. Their fury and determination nevertheless found a just cause, though the Allies were not to know the full horror of what they faced until the end of the war. Here as much as on the Continent of [Europe](#), though few knew it, they fought a barbarous power, guilty already of dreadful crimes and planning others of diabolical degradation.

It was an honour to serve such a cause and in such company. There were men in Eighth Army from the [United Kingdom](#), South Africa, [India](#), [Australia](#), Palestine, [Poland](#), [France](#), [Czechoslovakia](#) and many other countries as well as from New Zealand. Together they paid the price in killed, wounded and missing of 17,700 men (against some 38,000 enemy casualties).

More than a quarter of these came from New Zealand; 4620 men, nearly a thousand of them killed. ² This was a greater loss than that of any other Eighth Army division. It was a thousand more than the New Zealand casualties in [Crete](#), nearly double those in [Greece](#), and three times the figures for the [Orsogna](#) or [Cassino](#) battles in [Italy](#). Only in the next campaign, described in [J. L. Scoullar's](#) volume, [Battle for Egypt](#), were they surpassed, and then only in numbers of wounded. More New Zealanders died and more were taken prisoner in crusader than in any other campaign of the Second World War. This was a heavy loss indeed and there were few communities in New Zealand untouched by it.

¹ Gentry, letter of 23 Mar 1960.

² For details of casualties see Appendix I.

This loss, however, was not the only spectre at the feast of victory. In February Eighth Army was back at [Gazala](#), sadder but scarcely wiser and ready as ever to disperse its efforts, divorce its armour from its mobile infantry, and in other ways repeat the errors of its first campaign. There were therefore some at the table who felt that crusader had failed. The enemy armour, though badly battered, had not been destroyed, and the fertile slopes of the Green Mountain and most of the empty wastes of [Cyrenaica](#) had been returned to the enemy in a matter of weeks. In May and June of 1942 Eighth Army was defeated again, [Tobruk](#) was lost, and the [Nile Delta](#) gravely threatened.

But Eighth Army did not fight alone and crusader was not mounted purely for Army purposes. The [Royal Navy](#) and the Royal Air Force also had their goals and they were better served by the outcome. [Malta](#), for example, was no disinterested spectator. It still had its hardest test to face, and the Navy and the [RAF](#) between them were able to sustain this embattled island without at the same time having to supply a besieged garrison in [Tobruk](#) and provide air cover for its small ships. The African airfields of the [RAF](#) after crusader were 120 miles nearer [Malta](#) than before—240 miles on the round trip and therefore a great boon to aircraft searching the sea lanes. This was all the more valuable because of losses in the [Mediterranean](#), following on the sinking of the *Barham* and *Ark Royal* in November, which made December a black month indeed for the [Royal Navy](#). The surface striking force from [Malta](#) (Force K), which had proved a deadly menace to Italian shipping, was put out of action, chiefly by mines; ¹ two battleships were heavily damaged by Italian 'human torpedoes' in [Alexandria](#) harbour; and the consequent desperate plight of the [Mediterranean Fleet](#) was prolonged by the crisis in the [Indian Ocean](#) and the [Pacific](#), which drained off ships and aircraft and some Army units much needed in the [Middle East](#).

Black December was followed by blacker January in which the desert situation was as uncertain as that at sea; but things settled down in February and for four vital months, while the British Commonwealth and its allies (now including the [United States](#)) were recovering from the blows struck by the Japanese, there was much comfort from what
crusader

had gained. The desert front was well over a hundred miles farther west, it was stocked by sea

¹ Another 150 New Zealanders were lost when the Neptune went down (after striking four mines) in a heavy sea off the Libyan coast on 19 Dec, with a total loss of more than 750 lives. This was the heaviest loss of life in the history of the [RNZN](#) and, with those lost in the Chakdina and Jantzen, brought to 274 the total of New Zealanders lost at sea as a result of crusader. See Waters, [The Royal New Zealand Navy](#), pp. 191–4.

as well as by land, the supply outlook also improved with every mile the railway crept towards [El Adem](#), and there was no constant strain to maintain a beleaguered garrison far behind the enemy's lines.

The relief of [Tobruk](#), then, became the reward of this desert campaign. crusader thus turned out to be defensive rather than offensive in its outcome; but if, instead of conquering half of [Libya](#), it helped to save Egypt and [Malta](#) and gain time to redeploy against [Japan](#), it was all the same a vital success.

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APPENDIX I

Appendix I

Casualties in crusader Campaign

THE figures arrived at by Major-General Playfair and his associates ([The Mediterranean and the Middle East](#), Volume III, p. 97) are as follows:

Total Forces	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Total Casualties	Percentage of Total Force
German 65,000 ..	1,100	3,400	10,100	14,600	22½
Italian 54,000 ..	1,200	2,700	19,800	23,700	43
Total Axis 119,000	2,300	6,100	29,900	38,300	32
British 118,000 *	2,900	7,300	7,500	17,700	15

..

The New Zealand figures were:

Total Strength	Killed or Died of Wounds	Wounded	Prisoners of War	Total Casualties
Nearly 20,000	879	1,699	2,042 †	4,620

* It is not clear if this is the maximum strength of Eighth Army or the total number of men who served in it throughout crusader, but the former seems more likely. If the former, then 2 South African Div and other troops which crossed into [Libya](#) in December would have increased the total substantially.

† Includes 103 who died of wounds, accident or sickness while prisoners of war.

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APPENDIX II

Appendix II

Minutes of Conference between General Freyberg and his Senior Officers at Baggush,
17 October 1941

BRIGS CONFERENCE 17th OCT

1. SECURITY.

Not possible to conceal that an attack is pending. Must prevent leakage of Date, and direction or method of attack.

certain officers must be told full details.

1. G.O.C.
2. Brigadier Miles.
3. Brigadier Hargest.
4. Brigadier Barrowclough.
5. Brigadier Inglis.
6. Colonel Gentry.
7. Colonel Maxwell.

1. Nobody else knows any of the main plan.
2. No service is to be told.
3. Although IO here has been told to prepare maps he does not know the general scope of plan or the role of Division. List to be kept and no mention outside this list. Study of maps and air photographs can be carried out here and IO will get any special material you want. he does not know the plan. No orders or instructions issued—just minutes of conference.

2. OBJECT OF OPERATIONS.

CAPTURE OF CYRENAICA.

Object Divided into Phases.

First Phase is to destroy enemy's armed ¹ forces.

This will in its turn be accomplished by threatening the forces investing TOBRUK in order to make enemy deploy his Armed Forces. Capture of TOBRUK is incidental.

FACTORS.

(a) Tank Strength. Reported in our favour 5 to 4. However German Mk III and M 13 (Iti) better than our Cruiser (132) (?) Our Armed Div slightly stronger than both German Armd Divs. One Armd Bde slightly stronger than one enemy Armoured Div.

¹ Thus in typed copy of the original, but 'armd' (armoured) was probably intended.

(b) Air Strength. They have decided superiority 3 to 2. Role present:

- a. Interfere with enemy recce.
- b. Attack supply system.

After D1.

- a. Maximum protection of our columns.
- b. Maximum interference with enemy supply system.

3. OUTLINE PLAN.

Must be elastic since enemy dispositions may alter before we attack.

(a) Northern Force. 13th Corps.

1 NZ Div. ¹

4 Ind Div.

1 Army Tk Bde + few Arty units.

Role:

1. To adv on N & S axis to isolate Enemy's fwd def area & pin enemy to ground E & S.
2. To drive westward join with S Force clear enemy out of intervening area.
3. Subsequently to reduce S.O. [[Sidi Omar](#)] and Solum area.

(b) Southern Force.

Armd Corps.

7 Armd Div.

22 Gds Brigade.

1 SA Div.

This force will be directed on **TOBRUK** with role of destroying enemy's armd forces. Secondary object relief of **TOBRUK** in conjunction with sorties from **Tobruk**.

(c) Centre Force. 22 Armd Bde Gp (Incl KDG less one sqn). [Later changed to 4 Armd Bde Gp.]

(1) Role. To protect left flank of 13 Corps from an attack by enemy armd forces.

(2) To draw off Armd forces in fwd area towards the Armd Div. If enemy is met in inferior strength to attack him.

(d) Oasis Gp. In order to deceive the enemy as to the direction of main attack, a composite column of ACs Lorried Inf and Arty will move from G [Giarabub (Jarabub)] prob D-1 object capturing JALO.

¹ The correct designation was simply the New Zealand Division, changed in 1942 to 2 NZ Division (the first served in the 1914-18 war). By analogy from **2 NZEF** the Germans anticipated this step and called it 2 NZ Div in 1941.

4. TIMING.

13 Corps will not be committed until Armd Corps get level on E & W axis. NZ Div position of forming up will decide place Armd Corps cross wire. Approach march will be a surprise so that it will have to be carried out without moon.

Admn. Three Fd Bases

1. **Sidi Barrani**

2. S of **Sofafi**

3. **Giarabub**

RCHO [?]

Water HQ

Water Tk Coy

Res MT Coys until [TOBRUK](#).

TRAINING EXERCISES.

Plans must be flexible so must training.

- (a) Protection on move first importance. Command of Arty Units not to be decentralised unless necessary. A-T. Arty. Fd Arty (not forgetting C.B.). AA Arty. Mines carried and put out and covered with fire. In Bde Battle AA problem.
 - (a) Gun Area.
 - (b) Wagon lines, and B Echelon area.
 - (c) Bn during attack.
 - (d) Bde HQ.
 - (e) Stella attack [i.e. one like the training exercises at 'Bir Stella']. Div Cav?
- (b) Night marching long distances followed by
 1. Attack by bayonet in dark.
 2. Attack under arty.

SUM UP.

We have your views on movement. What is now wanted is a proper appreciation and plan for

- (a) Grouping and protection of Col on move from an attack if no flank protection.
- (b) Protection of Col moving along an escarpment.

NOTE: importance of knowing every enemy minefield is obvious from a defensive point of view.

Recce of Forward Area.

Routes leading forward from

Assembly area S.E. of [Charing Cross](#) up to the line [SIDI OMAR - MADDALENA](#).

THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

NEW ZEALAND HONOURS AND AWARDS IN CRUSADER CAMPAIGN¹

New Zealand Honours and Awards in crusader Campaign ¹

knight commander of the order of the british empire

Maj-Gen B. C. Freyberg

bar to distinguished service order

Brig H. E. Barrowclough

Col G. H. Clifton (CE 30 Corps)

distinguished service order

Brig L. M. Inglis, MC

Brig C. E. Weir

Lt-Col L. W. Andrew, VC

Lt-Col C. S. J. Duff

Lt-Col G. J. McNaught

Lt-Col J. R. Page

Lt-Col C. Shuttleworth

Maj R. D. King

Maj C. H. Sawyers

member of the order of the british empire

Maj N. M. Pryde

Capt A. J. Neil

Lt J. D. McKerchar

2 Lt N. J. Rollison

WO I R. W. Cawthorn

bar to military cross

Capt R. Royal

military cross

Maj T. C. Campbell

Capt W. R. Carswell

Capt D. J. Fountaine

Capt R. C. Pemberton

Capt J. M. Staveley

Lt H. V. Donald

Lt G. L. Lee

Lt C. S. Pepper

Lt W. Porter

Lt J. W. Reeves

Lt A. C. Yeoman

2 Lt C. H. Cathie

2 Lt F. G. Clubb

2 Lt A. B. Cottrell

2 Lt A. R. Guthrey

2 Lt C. S. Morris (LRDG)

2 Lt I. L. Murchison

2 Lt A. R. W. Ormond

Rev. F. O. Dawson

distinguished conduct medal

S-Sgt J. C. Henley

Sgt W. Batty

Sgt G. M. Dodds

Sgt E. W. Hobbs

Sgt G. L. Lochhead

Sgt E. J. E. McQueen

Sgt C. W. Mack

Sgt H. R. Martin

Sgt A. C. T. Robertson

Sgt N. Trewby

L-Sgt R. L. Burk

L-Sgt A. B. Stewart

Pte D. M. Basset (LRDG)

Pte W. D. Friday

Pte G. H. Goad

Pte C. Shelford

Gnr C. J. Winthrop

bar to military medal

Cpl A. Sperry

military medal

WO I T. G. Fowler

BSM P. George

WO II K. B. Booker

WO II W. Pahau

Sgt R. G. Aro

Sgt R. J. Bayliss

Sgt W. A. J. Gorrie

Sgt P. Murtagh

Sgt J. L. Nicholas

Sgt D. R. Plumtree

Sgt A. J. Riddell

Cpl G. C. Garven (LRDG)

Cpl A. Russell

Cpl A. D. Smith

Bdr T. M. Hutchinson

L-Cpl L. H. Lovegrove

L-Cpl C. Munro

L-Cpl C. Waetford (LRDG)

Gnr G. R. Dobson

Pte C. Dornbush (LRDG)

Pte J. B. Kinder

Pte A. McKenzie

Pte M. Muir

Pte N. C. Olde

Pte K. R. Rieper

Dvr A. H. Waddick

Gnr R. Wixon

british empire medal

Sgt F. J. Webber

L-Sgt T. V. Carpenter (NZ Railway Operating Group)

Cpl I. R. Summers (NZ Railway Operating Group)

¹ Periodic awards are listed only if mainly for this campaign.

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NOTE ON SOURCES

Note on Sources

The primary sources for the New Zealand operations are the [2 NZEF](#) war diaries, [General Freyberg's](#) diary and other contemporary records, the files of the Prime Minister's Department, various reports and accounts, most of them in the archives of [War History Branch](#), and private documents including diaries and wartime and post-war correspondence and interviews. For the hardest phases of the fighting, particularly at [Sidi Rezegh](#), the testimony of other ranks has been invaluable, because many of the officers concerned are dead; but in military history of this kind two and two do not make four. Where a company commander died his platoon commanders cannot jointly replace his account; they can perhaps establish what happened but not all he had in mind. No amount of post-war research, moreover, can altogether make up for the loss of the records of 5 Brigade Headquarters at [Sidi Azeiz](#) or for those of 24 and 26 Battalions at [Sidi Rezegh](#).

On the enemy side there is a serious imbalance. Photographic copies or translations of almost all relevant German war diaries except those of Panzer Group Africa from 19 November onwards (which are missing) heavily outweigh the few Italian contemporary documents which have come to hand and published sources do little to rectify this. Kriebel's unpublished *Feldzug in Nordafrika*, however, is helpful and there are some excellent and well-documented appreciations prepared by the Enemy Documents Section of the Historical Branch of the Cabinet Office (though these, too, inevitably lack adequate Italian sources).

For details which seemed critical to New Zealand operations the [United Kingdom](#) official histories, narratives, and draft administrative history have been augmented by copies of [United Kingdom](#) war diaries and other documents supplied by the Cabinet Office. There are also New Zealand copies of many official [Middle East](#) records, including General Ritchie's report. Similarly the drafts of the official South African history and a narrative of the operations of [2 South African Division](#) in the frontier area have been supplemented by comments on the New Zealand narrative and by an extensive correspondence with the Union War Histories' Section of the

Prime Minister's Department, Pretoria, in which copies of some contemporary South African documents have been made available. Indian operations have been covered by the [United Kingdom](#) narratives, a narrative of the operations of 4 Indian Division (dated 17 April 1942) supplied by the Historical Section, [India](#), and published sources. The Australian Official War History section has elucidated some points in correspondence, but for details of Australian operations published sources are the main ones.

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THE RELIEF OF TOBRUK

GLOSSARY

Glossary

AA	anti-aircraft
AA & QMG 'A & Q'	Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General
Abiar	wells or cisterns (pl. of bir)
Abteilung	(German) unit (reconnaissance troops, etc.); battery (of field or medium guns)
Ack	Acknowledge
acrobat	Code-name for planned continuation of crusader to capture Tripolitania
ACs	armoured cars
ACV	Armoured Command Vehicle
ADC	aide-de-camp
Adm, Admin	Administration
ADS	Advanced Dressing Station (forward medical establishment usually situated behind RAPs of fighting units)
adv	advance(d)
A Echelon	Transport usually taken into battle
AFC	Air Force Cross
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle (tank or armoured car)
AG	Adjutant-General
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
Ain	spring
Air Fleet	Major Italian air formation (= Luftflotte)
Air Support Control	Combined Army- RAF organisation to bring air support to bear on ground operations
ALG	Advanced Landing Ground
amn	ammunition
ammn	
AOC-in-C	Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief
AP	armour-piercing
armd	armoured
armoured brigade	formation of fast cruiser tanks, etc.

army tank brigade	formation of slow infantry tanks, etc.
arty	artillery
ASC	Army Service Corps
A tk	anti-tank
A Tk	
a-tk	
A T	
Aust	Australian
barbarossa	Code-name for German invasion of Russia , starting 22 June 1941
battleaxe	British offensive of 15–17 June 1941 on the Egyptian-Libyan frontier
Bde	Brigade (British or Allied formation, normally three tank or infantry battalions) 34
Bde	Brigade (unusual German formation of two Regimente, the latter the equivalent of brigades)
B Ech(elon)	Transport sometimes temporarily dispensed with in battle
Bel	Belgian
Bersaglieri	Italian motorised infantry, organised in regiments each of two or three battalions
BGS	Brigadier, General Staff (chief staff officer at Corps or Army)
binary	(division) two-brigade (rather than three-)
Bir	well or cistern (pl. Abiar)
bivvy	bivouac tent; or small makeshift shelter in lieu of same
Blenheim	British twin-engined bomber
blower	radio-telephone
BM	Brigade Major (chief staff officer at Brigade)
Bn	Battalion (a unit of tanks or reconnaissance troops, normally three squadrons plus HQ; or infantry, four rifle companies plus HQ company; or machine-gunners, four companies of Vickers guns)
Bn	Battalion (German unit of tanks, anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns, engineers, infantry, machine-gunners, or motor-cyclists) (Italian organisation was similar)
Bofors	Automatic 40-millimetre light anti-aircraft gun of Swedish design
Box	All-round defensive position for battalion, brigade or division in static operations

BRA	Brigadier, Royal Artillery (Corps or Army)
Breda	Italian heavy machine-gun or light automatic cannon
Bren	standard British light machine-gun
Bren-carrier	light armoured tracked vehicle intended to carry same, but also used for reconnaissance, carrying ammunition or wounded under fire, etc.
brevity	Code-name for British offensive at Libyan-Egyptian frontier and Tobruk at end of May 1941
BTE	British Troops in Egypt (command excluding Western Desert Force, later Eighth Army)
Bty	battery (two, three or four troops of guns)
call sign	code identification of sender or intended recipient of R/T or W/T signal
carrier	see Bren-
Cav	Cavalry (light tanks, armoured cars, carriers)
CB	Companion of the Order of the Bath; counter-battery (fire), locating and silencing of hostile guns
CBE	Commander of the Order of the British Empire
CBO	Counter-battery officer
CCS	Casualty Clearing Station (large medical establishment situated between MDS and field hospital)
Cdr	Commander
CE	Chief Engineer (Corps or Army)
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CIH	Central India Horse (cavalry unit of 4 Indian Division)
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CLY	County of London Yeomanry
CO	Commanding Officer (usually of a unit)
Col	Colonel; Column (of troops or transport)
Coln	Column
Comando Supremo	Italian Supreme Command (counterpart of OKW)
Comd	Commander; Commanding
comn	communication(s)
commn	
conc	concentration (of troops, equipment, fire)
coy	(own) sub-unit of engineers, infantry or ASC troops (in infantry, three platoons; in others three or four sections)
company	

(enemy) sub-unit of tanks (=squadron), anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns, engineers, signals, infantry, service, or medical troops

CRA	Commander, Royal Artillery (of division)
CRASC	Commander, Royal Army Service Corps (of division—later in NZ Division called CNZASC)
CRE	Commander, Royal Engineers (of division)
crusader	Code-name for British offensive resulting in relief of Tobruk
Crusader	British Cruiser tank Mark VI, the latest model in crusader
Cs	Cars
CSM	Company Sergeant-Major
D1	Opening day of crusader
DAK	Deutsches Afrikakorps (German Africa Corps, commanded by Lt-Gen Cruewell)
DAQMG	Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
DEOR	Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles (South African)
det(s)	detachment(s)
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
Div	formation above brigade or Regiment, below corps
Division	
Div Arty	Divisional Artillery (Headquarters, often HQ NZA)
Div Workshops	Ordnance unit for maintaining guns, vehicles and other equipment
DLI	Durham Light Infantry
DR	despatch rider (usually motor-cyclist)
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
Dudaforce	The half of 19 Bn left at Ed Duda
Ech	First, Second, Third, three main contingents of 2 NZEF in order of embarkation, chiefly comprising 4, 5 and 6 Brigades respectively (see also A Echelon, B Echelon)
Echelon	
ED	Efficiency Decoration
Ei	the (in place-names, elided with certain consonants—en-Nbeidat, Ed-Duda, ez-Zemla, etc.)
Engr(s)	Engineer(s)
en portée	(of 2-pdr gun) carried on special lorry, ready to fire
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
FAD	Field Ammunition Depot

Fd Amb	Field Ambulance (medical unit)
Fd Coy	Field Company (of engineers)
FDL(s)	Forward defended locality (localities) (the front was seldom a line, usually a series of FDLs)
Fd Pk Coy	Field Park Company (of engineers)
Fd Regt	Field Regiment (unit of artillery)
Feldzug	campaign
FFC 36	Plan 36 of the Field Force Committee, War Office
Fieseler Storch	German army co-operation light aircraft
Fifth Column(ist)	Subversive group working for Axis powers (member of same)
Fliegerfuehrer Afrika	German Air Commander, North Africa
FMC	Field Maintenance Centre (included FAD, FSD, etc.)
FOO	Forward Observation Officer (field or medium artillery)
formation	any grouping higher than unit
FSD	Forward Supply Depot
Fwd Base	Forward Base (main supply and maintenance area and organisation, usually at Railhead)
fwd(def)	forward (defence; defensive)
G50	Fiat fighter aircraft
Gabr	tomb
Gasr	fort; hill resembling same
G Branch (Office)	Staff of division or higher formation or command dealing with operations
GCMG	Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George
Gds	Guards
Gen Tpt Coy	General Transport Company, RASC
GHQ	General Headquarters
Gk	Greek
GOC (-in-C)	General Officer Commanding (-in-Chief)
Gp	(Battalion or Brigade) force of all arms; (RAF) major formation, above Wing
Group	
GPO	Gun Position Officer (field or medium artillery)
Grid (line)	Numbered map ruling, part of pattern usually of one or ten kilometre squares; on artillery boards the grid (of any convenient size) would be corrected if possible by survey and own and enemy gun positions, OPs, etc., marked in
GSO (I, II, III)	General Staff Officer (Class 1, 2, 3)

H	Hussars; heavy
HAA	Heavy anti-aircraft
Hagfet	unroofed cistern
Half-track	Vehicle with wheels in front, tank-like tracks in rear
HE	high explosive
HMG	heavy machine-gun
Honey	nickname for General Stuart tank (American M3)
HQ	headquarters
hy	heavy
I	Intelligence (of enemy)
Int	
2 i/c	Second-in-command
incl	inclusive; including
Ind	Indian
inf	infantry
I	heavily-armoured slow tank, either Mark II (Matilda) or Mark III
Infantry tank	(Valentine)
IO	Intelligence Officer
Iti	Italian
Jock Column	usually a field battery, two infantry companies, anti-tank troop, etc., on an independent mission (after Brig 'Jock' Campbell)
KBE	Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire
KCB	Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath
KDG	King's Dragoon Guards (a reconnaissance unit)
Kessel	cauldron; basin-like hollow in ground
kilo	kilometre
km	
1KRRC	1 Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps (the '60th Rifles')
LAA	light anti-aircraft
laager	defensive disposition of unit or formation halted in mobile operations, open order by day and close order by night (often spelt 'leaguer', though pronounced 'laager')
LAD	Light Aid Detachment (Ordnance establishment for repairing guns, transport, etc., within brigade or unit)
leaguer	encampment of troops besieging fortress; by analogy, laager
line (transport)	unit
1st	

2nd	divisional (carrying between FMC and division)
3rd	rear (carrying between railhead and FMC)
LMG	light machine-gun
LO	Liaison Officer
LOB	Left out of battle
L of C	Line(s) of communication
LRDG	Long Range Desert Group
LRS	Light Recovery Section (of armoured formation, for repairing or salvaging tanks)
Lt	Lieutenant; light
2 Lt	Second-Lieutenant
Luftflotte	German Air Fleet, largest formation of Luftwaffe
Luftwaffe	German Air Force
M	medium
M 13	chief Italian medium tank
Magen	cistern (= bir)
mantle (gun-)	part of tank turret immediately protecting gun
Mark (I, II, etc.)	designation of production type, especially of tanks (in German documents, 'Mark II' = Matilda tank; British documents refer to Pzkw II, III, IV—q.v.—as Mark II, III, IV; see also 'Crusader', 'I tank'; the Mark VIB was the standard British light tank)
Maryland	twin-engined bomber (American)
Matilda	See 'I tank'
MBE	Member of the Order of the British Empire
MC	Military Cross; motor-cycle
MDS	Medical Dressing Station (divisional medical establishment usually situated between ADS and CCS)
ME(F)	Middle East (Forces)
Me109F	high-flying single-engined Messerschmitt (German) fighter
Me110	twin-engined long-range fighter or fighter bomber
Med	Medium
MET	mechanised enemy transport (i.e., enemy vehicles)
(M)MG	(Medium) machine-gun
M.H.s	armoured cars fitted with Marmon-Herrington four-wheel-drive
m.i.d.	Mentioned in Despatches
m.i.h.	miles in the hour (a rate allowing for halts)
MM	Military Medal

MO	Medical Officer
Mot	motorised
m.p.g.	miles per gallon
m.p.h.	miles per hour (actual rate)
MT	mechanised transport
mtd	motorised
Mtd	Mounted
NAAFI	Navy, Army, Air Force Institute(s)
NCO n.c.o.	non-commissioned officer
NZA	New Zealand Artillery
NZE	New Zealand Engineers
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
NZOC	New Zealand Ordnance Corps
Oases Group	British force based on Jarabub, Force E of which captured Jalo, etc.
Oasis Coy	Specially trained and equipped German company of positional infantry, one of five grouped under an independent headquarters, z.b.V. Bn 300
OBE	Officer of the Order of the British Empire
OC	Officer Commanding (squadron, battery, company)
offrs	officers
Os	
OKH	Oberkommando des Heeres (High Command of the German Army)
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (Supreme Command of the German Armed Forces, roughly equivalent to the War Office)
OP	Observation Post
Ops	Operations; staff branch dealing with same
Ord (Fd Pk)	Ordnance (Field Park—unit for supplying and maintaining equipment issued through Ordnance)
ORs	other ranks (not officers)
PA	Personal Assistant (to GOC)
Panzergruppe Afrika	Panzer Group Africa (commanded by Gen Rommel)
Pz Gp Africa	
pl	platoon
POL	Petrol, oil and lubricants
portée	see en portée

posn	position
pr	pounder
pdr	
Point Pt	Height marked on map, usually in metres above sea level
PU	pick-up (truck)
PW	prisoner(s) of war
p.w.	
Pz	German tank; armoured (unit or formation)
Panzer	
Pzkw (II, III, IV)	Panzerkraftwagen (German tank) (Mark II, III, IV) (see 'Mark')
Q	Quartermaster; (broadly) administration
QM(G)	Quartermaster(-General)
quad	lorry for towing British field gun or anti-tank 18-pdr
RA	Royal Artillery
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAC	Royal Armoured Corps
RAP	Regimental Aid Post (unit medical establishment)
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
RE	Royal Engineers
RECAM	short title of reconnaissance group of Corpo d'armata di Manovra (CAM), the Italian Mobile Corps (more strictly Corps of Manoeuvre)
recce	reconnaissance; reconnoitre
Regem	cairn or similar natural feature
Regt	Regiment (unit of tanks, reconnaissance troops, or artillery; in British Army also groups of tank, artillery or infantry units, e.g., RTR, RHA, Black Watch)
Regt	Regiment (enemy) (formation of armoured troops or infantry, roughly equivalent to 'brigade'; also unit of field or medium artillery)
Reichsmarschall	German rank above Field Marshal, exclusive to Goering
Reinforcements (4th, 5th, etc.)	Successive contingents of 2 NZEF after Third Echelon
Repat	Repatriation
rept, rpt	repeat (message)
Res	reserve
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RGH	Royal Gloucestershire Hussars

RHA	Royal Horse Artillery (motorised, usually supporting armoured troops)
RHQ	Regimental Headquarters
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer (of a unit)
RMT	Reserve Mechanical Transport (general carrier when not taking infantry into or out of action)
Res MT	
RNC	Royal Natal Carbineers
RNZA	Royal New Zealand Artillery (Regular Force only)
Royals	The Royal Dragoons (reconnaissance unit)
r.p.g.	rounds per gun (expenditure of ammunition)
RSM	Regimental Sergeant-Major (senior NCO of unit)
R/T	radio-telephony (wireless transmission of speech)
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment, Royal Tanks (part of RAC)
R Tks	
Rugbet	watercourse
Ry Op Coy	Railway Operating Company
SA	South African(s); small arms
SAAF	South African Air Force
sangar	rocks piled up for protection in lieu of slit trench where ground was too hard to dig
SC	Staff Captain (administrative staff officer at Brigade)
sec	section (2–3 guns; detachment of Signals; third of infantry platoon; third of ASC company, etc.)
Serb	Serbian
shd	should
Sidi	saint or marabout
Sigs	Signals (responsible for R/T, W/T, DR, telephone and other communications)
sitrep	situation report
slit trench	one- or two-man trench for fire position or protection
sommernachtstraum	Code-name for German reconnaissance-in-strength into Egypt, 14–16 September 1941
SP	self-propelled (of guns; usually portées); Starting Point
spandau	nickname for standard German light and medium MG
sqn	squadron (of tanks, reconnaissance troops, or aircraft)
ST	Starting Time
Stuart (General)	American M3 light cruiser tank
Stuka	Junkers 87 dive-bomber

Svy	Survey
Tac/R	(aerial) Tactical Reconnaissance
TAF	Tactical Air Force
tentacle	wireless detachment, usually of Air Support Control
tiger	Code-name for naval and air operation to pass shipments of tanks and aircraft through Mediterranean to Malta and Egypt early in May 1941
Tk	tank
Tommy gun	Thompson sub-machine-gun
Totensonntag	lit. Sunday of the Dead, equivalent on the Lutheran calendar to All Souls Day
tp(s)	troop(s); part of squadron of tanks or reconnaissance troops (usually four tanks, armoured cars); part of battery (4–6 guns)
Trg	Training
Trigh	track
U-boat	German submarine
UDF	Union Defence Force (South Africa)
unit	tank, reconnaissance or infantry battalion, artillery regiment, or equivalent grouping (usually in British Army commanded by lieutenant-colonel)
Valentine	see 'I tank'
VC	Victoria Cross
VD	Volunteer Officers' Decoration
wadi	watercourse
war establishment	authorised full allotment (of men, weapons, etc.)
wastage	reduction of manpower
WDF	Western Desert Force
Wehrmacht	German Armed Forces
Y & L	The York and Lancaster Regiment
York & Lancs	
Zaaforce	The half of 19 Bn which returned to Zaafran
z.b.V.	zur besonderen Verwendung (for special purposes—i.e., independent)

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